



Every Rogue's Heart

USA TODAY & BESTSELLING AUTHORS

ALLISON MERRITT

AMANDA MARIEL

TAMMY ANDRESEN

SANDRA SOOKOO

REBECCA LOVELL

DAWN BROWER

Every Rogue's Heart

Allison Merritt
Sandra Sookoo
Amanda Mariel
Rebecca Lovell
Tammy Andresen
Dawn Brower

Contents

Allison Merritt

Love in Plain Sight

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

About the Author

Other books by Allison Merritt

Sandra Sookoo

The Lady's Chocolatier

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

USA Today Bestselling Author Amanda Mariel

Delighted by the Duke

Also by Amanda Mariel

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Excerpt: Enchanted by the Earl

Chapter 1

About the Author

Afterword

Rebecca Lovell

Only a Rogue Knows

Chapter 1

Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

USA Today Bestselling Author Tammy Andresen

My Enemy My Earl

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Epilogue
About the Author

Dawn Brower

Scheming with My Duke

Foreword
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10

[Excerpt: Secluded with My Hellion](#)

[Prologue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Dawn Brower](#)

Love in Plain Sight

Allison Merritt

Chapter 1

“Happy birthday, Jayne.”

A small, flattened scone made a sad present and a sadder cake. The scone, like Jayne, sat cold and alone, and also like her, probably expected to be devoured. She folded the paper wrapper around it. Fortunately for the bun, her appetite wasn't much.

Her nervous stomach was entirely accounted for due to her new position at Camprich Manor. Any moment now someone would come from the house in the countryside to fetch her and take her there. She'd accepted a position as a governess for the daughter of the Baron of Camprich. Today she would meet her new charge and the other staff at the manor.

She'd gotten the job largely thanks to her former employer's well-written recommendation, but leaving that employ hurt as badly as any bruise. Too bad the Eastons no longer required her services. She'd been with them for ten years as a companion to their only daughter, Lizette, right up until Lizette married to her beau. With Lizette no longer in need of a companion, Jayne was left as she had been when she first came to the Eastons—alone.

She drew in a breath. Everything would be fine. She didn't have much experience with children, but she was dedicated to her task. She couldn't afford to lose this position.

The morning air was crisp, but spring flowers bloomed around Upper Enggate. The train station was a little apart from the village and the hill on which it sat offered a view of houses and shops. No one could have picked a lovelier spot for a village or a train station. A well-tended climbing rose bush grew up a trellis outside the train station that was little more than a cottage. The lawn had a just mowed freshness about it and some dew still sparkled on the green blades. Birds twittered in the trees, adding a song to the morning. After her long train ride, at least she had relaxing surroundings while waiting on someone to pick her up. Much of her ride on the train had consisted of rain and clouds. The clouds had broken up very early this morning.

A handful of others had disembarked on the train with her, but they had paid her little notice and had gone on to their destinations. Leaving her to sit and wait. The day was just nice enough that she didn't mind.

The jingle of harness came from over the crest. A moment later, a tall bay horse pulling a dogcart appeared on the puddle-splashed road.

The gentleman driving sat straight on the seat. His gaze fell on her, but his expression was unreadable. He wore simple clothes—a light brown frock coat over a blue shirt. Tan cotton trousers tucked into tall black boots. A strange hat sat on top his head. One unlike any she'd seen outside of magazines.

A...cowboy hat?

The horse stopped in front of the train station.

The driver exited the conveyance with grace. He pushed up the brim of the hat. Sunlight hit his tanned face and highlighted the olive shade of his irises. His gaze didn't flicker or go elsewhere. He stared at her with purpose. He walked straight up to her with confidence in his swagger and a smile on his face. "Miss Strange?"

Jayne's heart pounded. Her mouth seemed dry. Few men ever held her gaze so long, preferring to turn their eyes on prettier women. He seemed to peer straight into her soul. She so rarely drew genuine interest from a man. "I, um..."

"You're not Miss Strange?"

His American accent, so different from the ones she knew was startling. "I am Strange."

His mouth tipped up in a smile before his gaze settled on her again.

Her face burned. "That is to say, I am *Miss* Strange. Forgive me. It's been a long trip."

He jerked his thumb at the three trunks and valise beside the bench. "Is this your luggage?"

"That's everything, yes. It seems a bit much for your dogcart." *It's everything I own in the world.* "We won't have to leave anything behind? Any miscreant could load up my things and make off with them."

"I'm sure old Duff can handle the load." He gave the horse a fond glance. "I know you women are particular about your belongings."

"Indeed, sir. I don't mean to be a challenge so early in our relationship, but I wouldn't like to lose any of my things."

"Relationship." His mouth pinched. "Forgive me, Miss. I failed to introduce myself. It's unusual for me to be so rude."

She held back laughter. Men were often rude—though usually not with intent—in her presence. Being plain-featured meant she was frequently overlooked. That was what Lady Easton intended when she

brought Jayne in to be Lizette's companion. Her plainness made Lizette's delicate features shine so much brighter. "It's no matter."

He swept off his hat and bowed. "Fletcher Nash, at your service."

She inclined her head and managed a curtsy. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Nash. I'll be relieved to get to Camprich Manor and greet the lord and lady."

Mr. Nash replaced his cowboy hat. "There's a problem with that."

Fear tumbled into her stomach. "What sort of problem?"

"Lord and Lady Camprich left for the Continent a week ago."

"With their daughter?" She pressed her hand to her stomach. What in the world would she do? Where to go? Lady Easton had given her a nice sum for her services, but it would run out eventually.

"No, Miss Bethany remained behind. Your position is safe." He picked up her valise, set it aside, then lifted the top trunk. He barely grunted at the weight as he shifted it into the cart.

Jayne fanned her face. "Thank heavens."

"Rest assured, you're needed more than ever with Lady Camprich across the sea. Miss Bethany is looking forward to your arrival."

"And I'm looking forward to the introduction. I'm sorry I missed the lord and lady, though. I had no idea they intended to leave."

He grunted when he lifted the second trunk. Mr. Nash seemed fit enough for the task, but a sheen of sweat dampened his face. He loaded the final trunk, then tossed the valise on top. "And we're off. Need a hand up?"

"No, I'm capable. Thank you." She approached the cart, avoiding Duff's mouth, though he barely blinked at her. She climbed up the side. Rich maroon velvet covered the cushioned seat. The ride back to the manor would be in comfort, even if her nerves still tingled and her stomach fluttered.

Mr. Nash joined her on the seat, then set Duff into motion. "Sorry for the wait this morning. At least it stopped raining."

"I'm sure your reasons for the delay are valid." Or he'd forgotten her, which wouldn't come as a surprise.

"I didn't forget you, if that's what you're thinking. We had half a dozen mares escape from the paddock right before dawn. It took most of the morning to round them up. Not a single one of them wanted to come home. Not for food or sweet talking or to get back together with the part of the herd that didn't run away. I can imagine what Lord Camprich would have said if he knew they got out. It wouldn't have been pretty."

"How did they get loose?" Half a dozen finding themselves outside their confinement areas seemed like a great number.

"One of the hostlers left a gate unlatched. Careless fool. I fired him right there. Those glossy-coated, prancing ponies cost more than it

takes to pay him for a year. Now I'm short-handed."

"You manage Lord Camprich's stables?" She knew little about horses. One small girl would be far easier to watch after than even one horse.

"Stable foreman. More like an overpaid hostler. Camprich has some of the finest stock I've seen in my lifetime, but most of them are unmanageable monsters because he's always off touring some part of the country or out of England altogether. The foreman before me didn't bother with breaking any of the colts born on the estate. To be blunt, Camprich is oblivious to what he has here, and in the past, his hired help wasn't always helpful." He shook his head. "Sorry. I'm giving you a poor impression of a man you haven't even met. He's a good boss. Listens to my concerns when he's available to hear them. We've made major improvements to his stables in the last year. It's not the worst place anyone could find work."

Interesting and puzzling. "If you don't mind me asking, whatever brought you to England? I've met a few Americans, but not enough that you aren't still a little exotic to me. Especially your hat."

He met her gaze and laughed. "My hat is a frequent topic of conversation around here. Money, in short brought me here, Miss Strange. Camprich offered me a real nice sum if I'd come be his... how'd he put it? His horse wrangler. I think the American West was rubbing off on him. My official contract calls me a foreman. I like that better."

"It sounds like an exciting story, Mr. Nash." Her voice got quieter with every word, a problem she'd developed early on once she realized men weren't interested in paying her any mind. Being plain and lacking a dowry made them run away in droves.

"Not really. I did mounted shooting and stunt riding in Buffalo Bill's Wild West tour. Camprich happened to catch it both during Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and in the States. He was in sore need of a dependable man to straighten out his stables. Money came into the picture and here I am."

Surely there was more to it than that. "You gave up everything in America to come here? To a place your family probably fled less than a hundred years ago. Seems to be a bit of step backward, I'd say."

He stared at her.

Heat flooded her face. "Forgive me. I've often been told I too readily express my opinions."

He cleared his throat. "I didn't have much to give up, to be honest. It wasn't some great sacrifice. It was stepping onto a boat and moving to a country I've only heard about. Not so bad."

"I can't imagine trying to figure out the differences. I think I'd be terrified to cross an ocean. You'd have no friends, no family in a

strange place.” Although, she had neither this far from London. If she’d ever really had friends. Most of the women she knew were far better acquainted with Lizette and only invited her along as a kindness.

“I guess I was ready for a change of pace. It was a little boggling, coming here. You call cookies biscuits. Why?”

“Your biscuits are more what we would call a scone.” The one in her handbag was probably crumpled to crumbs by now. “There must be a thousand things that confused or frustrated you about coming here.”

“I adjusted well enough. Always have.” He took one hand from the reins to point into the distance. “There. That’s Camprich Manor, nestled into the valley.”

The house, cut from limestone, rose up three stories. Green ivy climbed the sides, blanketing the stone with waving leaves. Smoke curled from the twin chimneys at either end. A fountain in the middle of the circle drive, some large effigy she couldn’t make out yet, glistened with a spray of water. Even at the distance, the tended gardens dotted with color drew the eye.

The stable was some distance from the house, but no less spectacular with the same stone and red pitched roof. Horses of many colors littered the green paddocks.

“It’s lovely.”

“I’m fond of it.” He clicked his tongue at Duff.

The horse picked up the pace.

“You don’t miss America even a little? What part of it were you from?” Once freed, her curiosity wouldn’t be sated until she had all the answers.

“I only miss it when some blockhead hostler lets the horses out, then the horses refuse to cooperate. Or when I express a concern and my boss dismisses it. Or when people start gossiping about my hat and my accent and my strange American ways. That’s when I want to throw all this away. Mostly, I’m content enough right here.”

“Have I been too pushy about it?” She could be. Lady Easton had chastised her for it. “As I said, I’ve not made acquaintance with many Americans. I imagine you would have a lot of questions if I came to your shore.”

“It’s fine. Too many questions can be overwhelming, even answering some of the same ones again and again can become irritating, but I can see you’re honestly curious.” He shrugged. “Don’t fret about it. Oh, and Texas. That’s where I’m from.”

Her American geography knowledge was sorely lacking. “Which is how close to New York?”

Mr. Nash’s deep laughter rang out over the crunch of gravel

beneath the wheels. "A long, long way. At the bottom of the States. It touches Mexico."

She had a vague idea of where Mexico was. "I see. You worked on a ranch there? With cattle, I assume."

"I did."

"Does it rain there much? Or is it dry? I can't even imagine what a desert must be like."

"It rains enough to keep good grass for the cattle. Most of the time. We get droughts, but I suppose everyone does. No deserts for us. You should go to Texas, if you ever have the chance. It's a whole other world compared to your civilized country."

"Are there truly snakes with rattles on their tails?" The very notion made her shudder. Wild Indians, snakes, endless prairie, and outlaws was a lot of danger for one place.

"There surely are. The biggest one I ever saw must have been as tall as me. But the way I understand it, Texas doesn't have anything on some of those wild places you hear about in Australia." He smiled again. "Much as I'd like to answer your every question about it, I have to get back to work. And you have an afternoon with Miss Bethany."

The dogcart made its way up the lane to the main house. Up close everything was even prettier than it had been far away.

"I'm a bit nervous." She squeezed her hands together. What if Bethany hated her?

"Of meeting the little lady of the house?" He turned Duff around the house, to the back where the servant's entrance was located. "She's anticipated your arrival since Camprich told her he'd hired a new governess. She's been a-dither with excitement to learn whatever it is you plan to teach her."

"That's good news."

A man came out to greet them. Straight and tall, he wore a dark suit over his tall frame. It matched his impassive expression. He neither seemed delighted nor relieved to see them. "Mr. Nash."

"Martin." Mr. Nash touched the brim of his hat. "This is Miss Strange. Miss Strange, James Martin, the lord and lady's butler. From here he'll take you to Miss Bethany."

"Martin. Very good to meet you."

He offered his hand to help her down from the dogcart. "I'll handle transferring your things to your room. Let's get you settled before your introduction to Miss Bethany."

She faced Mr. Nash. "Thank you for the ride. It was enjoyable and informative."

"Happy to help." He climbed out of the cart. "I'll unload the trunks for you, Martin, then take Duff back to the stable."

"I'll take my valise now, please." She rounded the rear of the cart

and pulled it from the back.

“Thank you. Come this way, Miss Strange.” Martin led her to the house.

She cast a look back at Mr. Nash. He lifted one of the trunks, then set it on the ground.

He raised his gaze to her and nodded.

Martin got the door for her. “We have a room made up for you. I’m sorry the lord and lady couldn’t be here to greet you, but they had a pressing matter in France to attend. I’m sure they’ll write soon. They do like to keep in touch with Miss Bethany. Her previous governess helped her compose letters back to them.”

“Why not take her with them?”

“It’s not for me to question why or why not. I simply fulfill my role here as my employer wishes. This way.”

They continued through the mudroom, down a hall to a staircase. The servants’ area of the house was rather dull. Plain wood floors without carpeting. Plaster walls rather than papered. She’d been in the Easton’s servants’ area many times, but never noticed the contrast between the higher living her former employers enjoyed compared to that of the servants.

“I’ll be coming in and out with Miss Bethany in the future.” Best to establish that from the beginning. She wasn’t of the same peerage as her charge, but she was no chambermaid either.

“Of course, Miss.”

Up the staircase and down another hall. Sunlight gushed through windows on either end of the house. Not a speck of dust or a smudge stained the glass.

Martin opened a dark oak door with a sparkling glass doorknob. “This should be suitable. Please have a look around and let us know if there’s anything we can do to make it more comfortable. Mrs. Lusk is the housekeeper. She should be along shortly.” He made a small bow, then departed.

The walls were papered with lavender and grey-striped silk. The devot spread across the wide bed matched along with the heavy drapes. Elegant, feminine, and yet, depressing. The colors matched many of the dresses in Jayne’s trunks. They were made to blend in, to be unnoticeable.

On the vanity, a small vase with a spray of forsythia and daffodils brightened the room. Beneath it, a note read, *Welcome, Miss Strange* in childish scrawl.

“How sweet.”

The wash stand held a pitcher with cool water. Jayne washed her face, then tamed the flyaway hairs that gave her a disheveled appearance. She scrubbed grit from her fingers.

“As good as I’ll ever be.” Her lips formed the words, reflected in the mirror.

The upper lip was too thin to provide a proper Cupid’s bow. The lower was all right. Not a mouth made for kissing, as Lizette had pointed out one night. Her face was diamond-shaped, with a healthy widow’s peak at the top. Too angular to be pretty. Fortunately, her eyes were set apart. Boring grey, like the wallpaper, but they might have been dung-colored. She pinched her cheeks for a bit of color.

“Nothing fancy, only Plain Jayne.”

She’d been a schoolmate and playmate for Lady Lizette Easton since she was twelve years old. Surely even Plain Jayne could manage to mold a young girl into a proper lady. If she was lucky, her position here might last until Bethany was in her teens.

Lord Easton’s quiet words to his wife rang between Jayne’s ears. “She’s not much to look at, but she certainly made our Lizette shine.”

Those words stung and she recalled them every day since her departure from London. Not everyone could be a great beauty, but she had valuable knowledge to pass on to Miss Bethany. She had brightened Lizette’s life too. If she couldn’t be pretty, at least she was useful.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Jayne rose from the vanity.

A woman in a black dress and spotless white apron and cap entered. Her dark blonde hair had a few grey stripes through it. Old enough to be Jayne’s mother—had anyone known who she was. She stood straight and proud, but her face was warm and open. “Miss Strange, welcome to Camprich Manor. I’m Emily Lusk. I hope the room is satisfactory. The footmen should be along with your trunks any time. I would be delighted to help you unpack. Is there anything I can get you while you wait?”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Lusk. Thank you for the lovely welcome. I’m fine. Just anxious to meet Miss Bethany.”

“Soon enough. She was lunching in the nursery a few moments ago. I could bring a tray for you if you like.”

“I should eat. It wouldn’t do to get faint in front of her.” She should really take the crumbled scone from her handbag as well. “But please don’t go through any trouble for me. A sandwich will suffice.”

“We have a hearty beef stew as well.”

“Tempting.” Jayne smiled. “I accept.”

“I’ll return in a moment. Perhaps after lunch, Miss Bethany will give you a tour of the house and grounds. She’s quite fond of the gardens and the stables. Her former governess took her out of doors for lessons on days much like this.”

“It sounds delightful.” Jayne reclaimed her seat at the vanity. What

if she ran into Mr. Nash again?

Don't be silly, Jayne. He was friendly on the drive here. It doesn't mean he wants to see you.

The voice in her head sounded awfully like Lizette.

"Does Miss Bethany ride?" She lifted her gaze to Mrs. Lusk's blue eyes.

"She has a pony. On pleasant afternoons, Mr. Nash has been known to give her riding lessons." Mrs. Lusk inclined her head. "I'll return soon with your lunch."

"Very good."

Mrs. Lusk departed.

Jayne took a deep breath. "You can do this. You were brought up in an excellent household with the best governess. A fine piano teacher. A painting tutor. You can play the flute. There is no reason to be afraid of a ten-year-old child."

"Actually, I won't be ten for two months."

The high-pitched voice made Jayne jump. "Oh, my."

Standing her doorway, wearing a pink dress with a cream-colored pinafore and a large pink bow at the end of her very bright red hair, stood Miss Bethany Camprich.

Chapter 2

Fletcher wiped sweat from his brow. He'd cooled and groomed

Duff to take some of the load off the other hostlers who had added work today thanks to this morning's mishap.

Duff, bless him, was the tamest horse in the stable besides Fletcher's own palomino gelding shipped here straight from Texas. Oro grazed in a paddock with Miss Bethany's pony, Little Dan, well away from Camprich's prized mares. Like the servants, it seemed horses lacking in pedigree weren't important enough to mingle with the high-bred stock.

Fletcher patted Duff's neck, then led him to the paddock with Oro and Little Dan.

The pony raised his head when he heard the latch open. He let out a whinny that Duff answered.

"Good boy." Fletcher patted the horse on the rump as it walked through the gate.

"Mr. Nash." Galen, one of the youngest stable boys, jogged across the ground to Fletcher's side. "I noticed Jenny limping. When I caught her, she had blood running down her right front leg on the inside. Looks as though she got herself a big splinter."

Well, damn. It had been too much to hope those bone-headed mares would come through their adventures unscathed. "Bring her around to the water pump."

"Yes, sir."

Fletcher headed for the stables as the boy trotted off. In the tack room, he mixed petroleum jelly and phenol into a paste. "It had to be Jenny."

The blood bay mare was as handsome as they came, light and delicate-looking, but she was a fighter. Known for her bite, cleaning and dressing her wound was going to be one exciting experience.

He collected the paste and a clean rag in a bucket, then headed outside.

Galen and Jenny stood feet apart, giving each other wary looks.

"She knows you're afraid." He emptied the bucket, then pumped

water into it. "Hold her firmly. She kicks me, you're going to be following Richard down the road. I'm in no mood to be kicked today."

"Yes, sir." Galen took Jenny by the halter.

She jerked her head and tried to back up as Fletcher approached with his sloshing bucket.

"Hold her tight. I mean it."

"I'm trying, sir."

Fletcher kneeled by her front legs.

Jenny pranced, her eyes wide and nostrils flared.

"Whoa, girl. I know it hurts. This isn't going to help any, not yet, but you'll thank me later." He pressed his hand to her chest.

She stilled.

Fletcher reached beneath her. As Galen had reported, a big chunk of wood protruded from the inside of the mare's forearm. "Sorry, sister." He grabbed the wood and yanked.

Jenny rose on her hind legs. Her knee caught him in the chest and pushed him backward.

Fletcher sprawled in the dirt, the wind knocked out of him.

The mare's feet hit the ground next to his head.

He covered his head, but she wasn't paying attention to him anymore so much as trying to get away from Galen, who fought to hold the mare in place.

"Mr. Nash!"

He lowered his arms. The knock to his ribs throbbed, but not bad enough that anything might be broken. It felt like he'd been hit with a mallet. She'd surprised him, but he'd live.

"Are you all right?"

Miss Strange held Bethany back from the scene. She gripped the girl by the shoulders. Both of them wore worried frowns and their foreheads creased with concern.

Fletcher got to his feet, but pressed his hand to his ribcage. "I'm fine. Better off than Jenny, probably. I still have work to do on her. The two of you should probably get back just to be on the safe side."

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?" Bethany, tall for her age and thin as a stick, peered at Jenny with eyes as blue as morning glories. "She's only frightened because she's in pain."

"Much as I appreciate the offer, there's nothing you can do here, darlin'. It's going to get uglier before it gets better, I'm afraid."

Although she was his superior, he'd dropped the endearment on Bethany the first time she'd come down to the stables to meet him. Like Miss Strange, the little girl had a fascination with America, particularly Texas, and every drawling word that came from Fletcher's mouth. He'd been the one to pick Little Dan out for her at an auction. Fortunately, her parents approved of her learning to ride and she

spent a great deal of time down here when she wasn't at regular lessons.

He met Miss Strange's gaze. Grey eyes like storm clouds were wide in her pale face. Her hair, a blondish-brown brought to mind the mane of a sooty chestnut mustang he'd once gentled back home. Not quite blonde, not quite brown. Unusual. Her features didn't lend any meaning to the word pretty, but gave her a strong, rather solemn appearance.

"We'll come back another time, Miss Bethany. Let's return to the gardens." Miss Strange gripped Bethany's hand.

Bethany stood firm. "I'd like to stay and watch."

"Stand over by the barn then. I don't want you to get hurt." He pointed at the stone wall of the stable. "Galen, you've got to hold Jenny tighter. If you can't do it, get Samuel. You know what, get Samuel anyway. I want both of you holding her."

"Yes, sir."

Fletcher took her halter as Galen went in search of the other stable hand.

"Did she get injured when she got out this morning, Mr. Nash?" Bethany squinted at the bloodied part of Jenny's leg. "She'll be all right, though, won't she?"

"We're going to fix her up as well as we can."

Bethany edged closer.

Miss Strange knotted her hands together and gave the horse an apprehensive look.

"Are you frightened of horses, Miss Strange?"

She tore her gaze away from Jenny. "Not frightened as much as I don't know much about them. I was a companion in my last employment. She didn't care for horses."

"You must meet Little Dan." Bethany's face brightened. "He's the gentlest of ponies. Mr. Nash can go out to the paddock right this minute and yank Little Dan's tail. He'll never even stop grazing. You can do anything with my pony and he's perfectly content."

"It doesn't seem very wise to yank a pony's tail." Miss Strange's mouth flattened. "Please don't attempt it yourself."

"It was a test to see what he could tolerate. I'd never want to pull his tail. That's cruel." Bethany frowned. "He's well-treated. I wouldn't allow anything else. I care for him very much. While I can't wait to grow up and have a full-sized horse, I will hate to give him up."

Fletcher rubbed Jenny's neck. "You've got time yet. I'll find you a good horse when you're of age. For now, enjoy Little Dan."

Samuel and Galen came to the yard. They each took one side of Jenny's halter.

Fletcher got to his knees again. "One more time, Jenny-girl. Be a

little kinder to me, huh?"

Samuel was bigger than Galen, stronger and more confident with the horses. He gave Fletcher a nod.

He reached between her front legs and began cleaning the wound. It hadn't festered yet and the blood flowed thick for a few moments. Beneath the blood, the cut was nearly over an inch long, and deep. Hopefully the paste he'd made up would help it close.

Jenny squirmed and tried to bite Galen, but Samuel pulled her head back. Her tail swished with annoyance.

"Almost done cleaning. Nearly there." Fletcher dabbed at the wound a final time. Since it had stopped bleeding, it only appeared a little ragged. "Let's put the ointment on, then you're free to go, girl."

She tossed her head as much as she could when he touched the injury with his fingers.

"Does it burn, Mr. Nash?" Bethany's worried voice carried.

"Maybe a little. Same as when you get a scrape and your governess put phenol on it. It stops after a while, doesn't it?" He smeared ointment across the broken skin, then got to his feet. "We'll check it this evening before you bring her in. Same thing tomorrow morning. Keep any eye on her for swelling or drainage."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry that she knocked you down. She's a handful, this one. I should have gotten Samuel from the start. She's always responded better to him." Galen held the mare, but didn't meet Fletcher's eyes. "I understand if you want me to go."

"It wasn't your finest moment, Galen, but she didn't kick me so much as just knock me down. You can stay. Turn her out, then get back to work."

"Thank you, sir." Galen led the mare away.

Fletcher gathered his things. "Is Bethany giving you the grand tour?"

Miss Strange nodded. "She's showing me everything I could possibly need to see around the manor."

"You keep Miss Strange out of trouble, darlin'. We both know there's plenty to be had around here." He grinned at the girl. "Next time you want to go for a ride, we'll saddle up Oro and put Miss Strange on his back. Teach her how the cowboys do it in Texas."

"Oh, no. No thank you. I'm perfectly fine on the ground." Miss Strange's face colored. "Kind of you, but no."

"We'll have to see if we can't change your mind. I have to take this back inside, but would you like me to catch Little Dan?"

Bethany held up the sugar cubes she'd tucked into her pockets. "No, I brought him a treat, but there's no need to catch him today. There's still so much to show Miss Strange. Tomorrow would be better for all of us."

Her giggle and the cheerful smile sent a pang stabbing into Fletcher's heart. He rubbed the center of his chest, where Jenny had hit him, but the injury ran a lot deeper than bone.

"Are you all right, Mr. Nash? You look like you're in pain." Miss Strange approached. "Should I fetch help?"

"It's nothing. I've got to keep moving. The work around the stables is never done. You two enjoy your visit with Little Dan." He wagged his finger at Bethany. "Don't let me catch you feeding sugar cubes to Oro. You'll spoil him."

She giggled. "I can't help it if he sneaks in and steals one, can I?"

"Ladies, enjoy your afternoon." He tipped his hat at Miss Strange and headed for the stable.

"Perhaps we should wait to visit the horses until Mr. Nash can accompany us to the paddock. I'm not comfortable walking around them."

"I go around them all the time. The tame ones, anyway. Duff and Oro and Little Dan. They're the three best animals here. I know to stay away from the mares and the two stallions. Mr. Nash helped Papa select them from auction. They were race horses. Very fast ones. Papa wants to raise them here."

"I'm sure between your papa and Mr. Nash, they will be the finest horses in all of England. However, I'd rather not meet any of them at this time. Let's head back to the garden. There's still plenty to see there, I think."

Fletcher set the bucket next to the wall, then he approached the ladies. "Miss Strange, I'd be more than happy to accompany you to the paddocks. I've been around horses since I was no bigger than a cricket and I can assure you no harm will come to you or Bethany while I'm there."

"Oh, please, Miss Strange?" Bethany turned her face up to her governess. "You'll like the horses, I promise."

Miss Strange's gaze flicked toward the manor, then back to the little girl. "All right. It's very kind of you to accompany us, Mr. Nash."

"It means so much to me." Bethany grabbed his hand. "Let's hurry. Little Dan will be wondering what's keeping us."

Her tiny hand, swallowed by his rough, callused one was as delicate as a bird. Fletcher swallowed the knot in his throat. One that cropped up every time Bethany came around. She reminded him of everything missing from his life. Teaching her to ride, watching her grow more confident and listening to her chiming laugh was gut-wrenching torture.

Miss Strange stared at him, her big, wide eyes searching his features.

He'd let his mood slip again. Bethany rarely noticed. She'd come to

accept his quiet ways. Her governess pinched her lips and pasted on a smile although her discomfort came through in the stiff way she moved.

Bethany bounced across the grass to the paddock. She lifted her hand to her mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

Miss Strange started, then pressed her hand to her chest. "Goodness, child."

Bethany grinned.

Little Dan, Duff, and Oro raised their heads from grazing. The pony whirled, his dark mane and tail flying as he tore across the ground on his short legs and raced to the fence.

The horses followed at a more leisurely pace.

Bethany let go of Fletcher's hand to meet her pony. She offered the first sugar cube on the flat of her palm. "There you are, special boy."

When he lipped it from her palm, she ran her fingers through his forelock.

"I'll come ride you tomorrow. Today is important. It's my duty to make Miss Strange feel welcome at Camprich Manor. You understand." She stroked his jaw. "Yes, you're a gentleman. Come meet Little Dan, Miss Strange. Let him get your scent."

Miss Strange met Fletcher's gaze. "Is it safe?"

"I've crossed paths with some mean ponies in my day, but there's not a cross bone in Little Dan's body. He's gentle as a lamb."

"Very well." Miss Strange drew in a breath. She crossed to stand beside Bethany. "Hello, small horse. It's very good to meet you."

Bethany giggled. "He's a pony! It's different than a horse. Horses are over fourteen hands high."

"Oh, this one must be a strapping ten hands, at least." Miss Strange turned her hands palm up in a shrug. "He's a stout little fellow."

"I tell him that he's handsome every day." Bethany caressed his cheek again. "All right, all right, back away. Let Duff and Oro have a sugar cube."

The other two waited a short distance away, ears perked as they watched.

Bethany reached toward Oro.

Miss Strange leaned on the fence. "I've never seen a horse that color. What is it?"

"A palomino. Oro means gold in Spanish." Fletcher rested his arms on the fence. "He's a quarter running horse. Fast, but mostly used for cow work. I brought him here from Texas. He didn't like the crossing. Refused to eat and lost a lot of weight. It never occurred to me that horses might get seasick. I don't know if I'll take Oro back to the States."

"Do you plan to return?" Miss Strange lifted an eyebrow.

“Not in the immediate future. My life is here right now.” They’d probably lay him to rest in the shady cemetery in Upper Enggate. England wasn’t his first choice for a place to live, but going back to Texas would be too painful.

“Did you train that horse yourself?”

Oro came to him, sniffing for another sugary treat.

“From the time he was a colt. He was born on my father’s place. A gift for my eighteenth birthday.” He scratched the gelding’s nose. “If you ever take the notion to learn riding, I’d be happy to saddle him for you.”

“It’s very kind, but I’m sure I won’t take you up on the offer.” She took a step backward when Oro sniffed at her. “No insult meant to either of you. He’s a beautiful animal.”

“He’s been a good companion on plenty of lonely nights.”

“You live alone?”

His breath caught. “Yes.” *Now.*

“I’ve always been alone. Even surrounded by others. It’s lonely, but it’s afforded me the ability and the time to expand my education. I like to read. I suppose it’s fortunate that loneliness led me here.” Her gaze settled on Bethany, who shooed Little Dan away from Duff while the horse crunched on his sugar cube. “I think I’m going to like it here.”

“You don’t have any family?” It wasn’t his business, but a sadness lingered in Miss Strange’s voice.

“I’m an orphan. My last employer brought me into her home as a companion to her youngest daughter. Of all things, because her daughter was painfully shy and tended to blend into a crowd. I was there to mend her wallflower ways and...” She gestured to her face. “To make her appear more attractive.”

Fletcher gritted his teeth. “You’re joking.”

“No. She wasn’t unattractive, but she tended to get overlooked because of her quietness. With me standing next to her, people began to notice her. Lady Easton dressed her daughter in bright colors and dressed me in dull ones. I became what she was—the plain, boring girl. And believe it or not, her mother’s idea truly worked. Lizette became popular.”

“That’s terrible.” How could someone exploit another person for her plain features? Use it to make her dull daughter into something better?

“It came with many benefits. As I said, a fine education. Shelter, food, clothing, trips to the Continent. A friend who was very nearly my sister. I wasn’t the Easton’s blood by any means, but they treated me well.” She clasped her hands together and looked down at the ground. “I had it much worse in the orphan home.”

It didn't seem fair, even with the benefits she'd received. "Why did you leave their employment?"

"Lizette met a young man last Season. She was married recently. I was no longer needed."

"You couldn't catch a beau during one of those Seasons?"

She smiled, though it held a trace of bitterness. "It was never my place to draw a beau. I was supposed to turn any man's attentions—not that there were many—to Lizette."

He held back a curse word. "They told you to do that?"

"Lady Easton insisted upon it." Her smile lost the brittle quality. "I didn't tell you that for your pity, Mr. Nash. I don't know why I told you, but don't feel bad for me."

"I don't." It was a lie and surely she knew. "I just can't believe people—even upper class people—would do that to someone. Then to turn you out."

"Lady Easton wrote a very nice recommendation for me. I had several offers for governess positions. I liked this one the best because it was far away from London." She turned toward Bethany. "I'm glad I accepted it. Miss Bethany seems lonely. I hope I can lift that from her."

"She is. That's why she spends so much time down here with the horses. She can talk to them and they never question her or judge her. All they care about is treats and a good grooming. I like her company. She's curious and bright. She makes me miss—" He bit his tongue. "Miss that youthful innocence when a horse was my best friend too."

"I don't want her to be a bother. Now that I'm here, I'll gladly keep her occupied if you find she's in the way."

However much it hurt to watch Bethany prance around the stables and bring up painful reminders of his life in Texas, he couldn't imagine not having her around. "No, she's never been a bother. She listens well and she knows better than to go around the other horses. Don't keep her away."

Miss Strange's smile grew. "If you're certain. Then I suppose I'm going to spend many afternoons out here watching her ride Little Dan."

"Whatever it takes to make the baron's daughter happy, that's what we do around here. She won't have many years left until her mother drags her to London to debut in her first Season."

She nodded. "She'll be a graceful lady, I hope. And an accomplished rider."

"Hopefully whoever she marries will have a big stable. She won't be content without one."

Bethany made her way to them. "I'm out of sugar cubes. We can return to the gardens, Miss Strange. If you're ready."

“That’s a good idea. There’s still much to see. Thank you for the conversation, Mr. Nash. Have a pleasant evening.” Miss Strange smiled at him again. It softened her face and lightened her eyes.

“You too. Ladies.” He tipped his hat at them.

Chapter 3

The nursery had been converted into a learning environment for

Bethany. A large slate took up one wall. A small desk solely occupied the middle of the room, while another larger desk sat in the corner for Jayne. The walls were cheerful yellow and a large window overlooked the garden.

Bethany wagged a piece of chalk between the fingers of her right hand, her chin propped up by her left, as she stared out the window. Rain had passed through earlier, but now the sun brightened the afternoon.

Though eager to learn and already reading at a high level, she often got distracted after lunch. The chalk flew from her fingers as she flipped it. When it hit the floor, the piece broke in half.

She slipped out of her chair to pick up the pieces. "Sorry, Miss Jayne. I'm hopeless this afternoon. All I can think of is getting outside to ride Little Dan. I'm afraid I have spring fever."

"What in the world is spring fever?" It sounded like a silly malady made up to account for laziness.

"Mr. Nash says it's when you feel restless because of spring. He says it often strikes him after the equinox. He would prefer to take Oro out and ride from one end of the country to the other. I think that might be the cowboy in him. They're wild, you know. Only a bit more tame than American Indians." Bethany's eyes were wild and glowing. "Papa saw his show, but he wouldn't take me. He said there were hundreds of Indians in the show. I would like to meet an Indian."

Jayne suppressed a shudder. If she never met an Indian, she would fare just fine. "Spring fever or not, you have arithmetic to finish. Once that's done, we can spend some time outside."

Bethany glanced down at her slate and sighed. "Must we continue?"

"You'll understand the importance of mathematics when you're a grown lady managing a household."

"Perhaps I won't have a household." Bethany lifted her chin. "I wish to travel all over the world. You can't take a house with you."

“Who will manage your funds while you do this traveling?”

Bethany’s lips pinched as she thought. “A manager. Papa has a stable manager. I shall have a travel manager.”

Jayne almost laughed at her pupil’s serious expression. “What if this travel manager cheats you out of money? What if he leaves you penniless in a foreign country?”

“I’ll hire someone I can trust. You or Mr. Nash.”

Flattering. “What if I marry or Mr. Nash decides to return to Texas?”

“Must you be so impossible, Miss Jayne?” Bethany collapsed into her seat. “Either of you would want to come with me. We’d have marvelous adventures.”

“I have no doubt. You do provide the best entertainment. Come now, finish those equations and we’ll see what Little Dan is up to.” Jayne rounded her desk, then went to Bethany’s. “Do you need help?”

“No, it’s just dull work. I don’t like numbers as much as words.” Bethany rubbed her chalk against the edge of the slate. She sighed. “I’ll try to hurry.”

Jayne went to the window. A breeze—slightly chilly—ruffled the heavy curtains. The stables were positioned on the opposite side of the house. No horses in sight, but the blooms in the garden called to mind fairy realms. A giant weeping willow at the center of the garden on its own small island while the water around it sparkled under the sun. Tiny fuzzy buds clung to the willow’s long, drooping limbs. The gardeners had taken care of the lawn, trimming the grass short and leaving the scent of it to fill the air.

The Eastons had a garden at their townhouse, but nothing like this. And no matter which part of London one visited, a slight reek of city always hung in the air. Here, she might catch a whiff of livestock, but never of offal-strewn streets. The noise level, too, held much appeal as she slept through the night without waking to the city sounds. Though she was without friends here, life was far improved by clear air and peaceful nights. And really, the company wasn’t so bad. Bethany was usually in bed by eight in the evening, which left Jayne plenty of reading time. Bethany didn’t rise until seven in the morning, so Jayne enjoyed the break of dawn unhindered. The servants were people, though distant and quiet enough that the house might have been occupied by mice instead of humans.

If anyone cared to ask how she liked Camprich Manor, she wouldn’t hesitate to give her glowing opinion. Perhaps it had something to do with the absence of her employers, but there was freedom in teaching how she liked and taking breaks when it seemed Bethany truly needed them.

“Miss Jayne, I’ve finished.” Bethany laid her chalk aside. “I have

the worst hand cramp.”

“No wonder, as you finished in a hurry. I hope you thought the problems through and didn’t guess.”

“I tried my best. Honestly.” Bethany’s solemn expression turned into a smile as she rose, then stretched. “Now may I go visit Little Dan?”

“Let’s change clothes first. Something proper for riding.”

The girl had a darling riding outfit the maid had mentioned was an exact replica of her mother’s. Bethany had asked for it specifically after Lord Camprich presented it to his wife. Though Bethany claimed Lady Camprich wasn’t much for horses.

“I’ll return in a moment. Please excuse me.” Bethany bolted from the room as though hounds sought her.

Jayne laughed. Bethany’s enthusiasm for life made it impossible to dwell on the melancholy thoughts that had dogged Jayne since Lizette’s wedding. Why remain stuck in the past when she had a perfectly lovely situation here?

She met Bethany on the landing and they went down to the stables together.

A golden horse raced across the flat expanse behind the stables. Oro and Mr. Nash executed a quick turn and the horse slid to a stop.

Mr. Nash urged the gelding backward a few steps, then pulled the reins, turning the horse in a short circle. With the nudge of heels, the pair took off again.

“Magnificent. What a beautiful display.” The horse’s coat gleamed under the sun like the ore he was named for.

“I’ve already asked Papa if I could have a running horse when I grow too big for Little Dan. I want one just like Oro. He said he would give it some thought. I hope that means yes.”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” She couldn’t take her gaze away from the horse and rider. They moved together in sync, two marvelous dancers gliding over the grass. He slowed the horse, letting the animal walk for a few moments.

Mr. Nash turned Oro toward them. He drew the gelding to a trot as he approached, then touched his hat the moment Oro stopped. “Ladies.”

“That was an impressive display of riding.” The words tumbled from Jayne’s mouth. “I’ve never seen the like.”

Mr. Nash smiled. “I have to keep him on his toes. He gets bored otherwise.” His gaze shifted to Bethany. “I expect you’re here for Little Dan.”

“Yes, sir. If you’re not too busy to tack him for me.” Bethany’s winning smile could warm the coldest heart.

Mr. Nash swung his leg over Oro’s back. “My pleasure. Let me tie

this old fella to the hitching post, then I'll see about getting your pony."

Jayne kept her distance, well away from the back end of the horse. Beautiful as Oro was, he might decide he didn't need an unfamiliar human behind him.

After Mr. Nash tied him, Bethany stroked the horse's neck and side. "Come pet him, Miss Jayne. He won't hurt you. Oro is much gentler than most of the horses here. Why, he's not afraid of anything nor would he even hurt a fly."

"I'm fine over here, thank you." Jayne stood under a tree out of the way of any nearby horses.

Bethany greeted the hostlers as they came and went from various chores. Her small face lit up when Mr. Nash led a fully saddled Little Dan into the yard. She allowed Mr. Nash to assist her into the side saddle. "Do you think it would be all right if we worked some of the smaller jumps today? Little Dan will get out of shape if I only run him around the paddock."

Mr. Nash nodded. "I'll have Galen set up a few for you. Go warm Little Dan up."

"Jumps? As in riding that horse over them?" Jayne's skin prickled. "No, I don't think that's appropriate. It's dangerous."

"It's not dangerous. I've been doing it for a couple of years." Bethany's lip slipped into a pout. "It's fun, and they're not very big jumps. Little Dan is good at it. Tell her." She pinned her worried gaze on Mr. Nash.

The Texan removed his hat, then wiped sweat from his brow. "Her father approved it, Miss Strange. He's aware of the dangers and knows that everyone at the stables is dedicated to keeping Miss Bethany safe."

"Oh." Jayne lowered her gaze. "By all means, then."

"Thank you." Bethany took Little Dan's reins and nudged him toward the paddock.

Mr. Nash went in search of Galen, but he returned shortly and joined Jayne beneath the tree. "She's a talented rider. Even for someone so young."

"I'll take your word for it."

His warm olive eyes met hers. "Did you have a bad experience with horses, Miss Strange?"

Her skin warmed beneath his piercing gaze. "I've never been around them much. I mentioned that." Not that she expected him to remember. Her stories were easily forgotten, plain as she was. "I haven't had any reason to become accustomed to any animals."

"You could help me groom Oro. I promise he won't hurt you. There's no better animal to become acquainted with on this

estate than him.”

“I really couldn’t. I should keep an eye on Bethany.” She gestured weakly toward the paddock. “It’s kind of you to offer.”

He took her hand. A warm, firm grip. The touch shocked her.

“Come on.” He gave her hand a gentle tug.

“Oh, very well.” Only because she didn’t want him to let go yet. She so seldom got to hold a man’s hand. And less frequently, the hand of such a handsome man.

Oro pricked his ears when they approached. A low nicker left his throat.

She stopped a few feet away. “This is probably close enough.”

“I’m surprised you’re so afraid. You came here all alone, but you’re going to let a little horse scare you?”

Mr. Nash’s voice had a teasing quality, but it wasn’t enough to send Jayne’s fear away. “That’s different. It was for a job. Horses are another matter. Who can say what goes on inside their minds?”

“That’s easy enough. It’s a trick of learning body language. See Oro? Right now he’s wondering when I’m going to either get back in the saddle or turn him out again. He’s watching us. Curious about our intentions.” Mr. Nash spoke softly. “He wants to meet you.”

“I doubt it.” A slight tremor took over. “You’re being silly. Next you’ll tell me that *he* told you that.”

“He might have.” Mr. Nash guided her closer. “Let him smell your hand.”

Please don’t let me lose any fingers. Jayne closed her eyes as Mr. Nash pushed her hand close to the horse’s muzzle.

Warm breath and poky whiskers grazed over her skin.

Jayne opened her eyes a fraction. “Is he finished?”

Soft lips wandered over her fingers. Oro snorted, leaving a fine spray of discharge behind, then he pulled his head away.

“Horse slime.” She shook her hand as Mr. Nash laughed.

He pulled a red kerchief from his back pocket. “Here, let me help. Sorry about that. One of the small hazards of introductions.” He cleaned each of her fingers individually.

The small act of kindness made Jayne’s heart race. He was only attempting to help, but the gentle touch made her skin tingle. “Um, yes. We’re introduced. That’s enough for today, don’t you think?”

“Stay there. Let me untack him, then I’ll get a brush. Before the end of the day, I’ll have another suitable groom on my hands.” Mr. Nash proceeded to remove the saddle from Oro’s back.

The horse shook himself when the blanket and the leather came off. He stood patiently, head lowered, ears twitching a bit as he listened to the sounds around the stable yard.

Mr. Nash carried the saddle back to the barn. He returned with

brushes, then handed a rectangular one with a smooth handle to Jayne. "This is the curry comb. It loosens dirt from his hair and picks up the hair he's shedding."

It weighed heavily in her hand. "He'll bite me if I hurt him."

"How many times have you brushed your own hair? It's the same idea. You're going to do fine. Start up here by his ears. We'll do his mane separately with a different brush."

She gingerly put the curry comb up by Oro's ear and stroked down. He didn't fuss, so she repeated the action while Mr. Nash inspected Oro's hooves. "Should I move on to his shoulders and back?"

Oro perked his ears up at her voice and huffed out a sigh.

"He says yes." Mr. Nash grinned at her over the animal's back.

Dust and hair swirled in the air as she progressed and stuck to her plain grey dress. Whoever washed it would likely be furious with her for making such mess. Too late now. She already reeked of horse.

"You're a natural." Mr. Nash admired the job she'd done. "Do his hindquarters, and then you can start on the other side."

"I'd rather not. I don't like his legs." She took a step back. "He'll kick me."

"Put your hand on his rump. He can see you. He knows you're there. The hand is a reminder for him. Oro wouldn't kick unless he was startled or he thought he was in danger."

She'd have to trust them both. "All right."

But the gelding barely moved as she took the brush over his hips and down his legs.

She laid her hand on Oro's rump, then quickly stepped around him.

Mr. Nash nodded at her. "Well done."

"My skills leave a lot to be desired. I'm better indoors than out."

"You'll learn." He took the curry comb from her and made short work of Oro's other side.

"I never thought my duties would include learning to groom a horse to please a little girl's riding instructor. Life is peculiar."

"That it is. We both wound up here." Mr. Nash gave her a hard brush. "Set this horse to gleaming."

"Polish him now." She laughed. "I thought my station above shining things like silverware and...even horses." She liked it, a bit. The leather, hay, grassy, sunshine-y, and slight dusty scent of the horse. He looked like a ray of living sunshine with his beautiful golden coat and his whitish mane and tail. Better still, Mr. Nash's smile made her heart race in a good way. That specific organ might be in a great deal of trouble if she didn't curb her desires to see him. He would never wish to court a woman like her. Impossible anyway. She couldn't be courted by a man if she wished to remain here as

Bethany's governess. The lord and lady would be furious if they thought they brought her here and she was only seeking a beau instead of their child's best interests.

Feelings any deeper than friendship with Mr. Nash were forbidden.

He worked on Oro's other side with another hard brush. Brows drawn together in concentration, though his olive-colored eyes were soft. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, displaying tanned forearms. Beneath the checkered pattern of his shirt, was the rest of his upper body so tan and muscled?

Her face burned and she ducked her head. She had no business wondering. But what would it be like to have a man look at her the way he looked at his horse? The way Lord Ivers looked at Lizette the day of their wedding?

You'll be fine as a spinster. When Bethany is old enough to graduate from a governess—and you've done your best with her, something to be proud of—you'll find another governess position. A husband is not necessary for happiness.

"You all right, Miss Strange?" Mr. Nash stared at her, the little furrow between his eyebrows creased. With concern.

"Yes. Very much so. I'm thinking about how best to get Bethany back into her lessons today. She's a sharp pupil, but easily distracted."

"Make them all about horses. She'll be thrilled."

His rich laughter sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

"Did you always love horses, Mr. Nash?"

"I suppose so. My daddy often took me riding before I could walk." He knocked hair and dust from the brush. "What did you grow up loving?"

Jayne turned her free hand palm up. "Books. They were a rare privilege. I didn't learn to read until I was almost Bethany's age. The ones with pictures were my favorites until then. Even an illustration could take me away from the..."

"From what?" He held her gaze.

"I grew up poor. Books helped me forget my empty stomach or the cold or the rain and worst of all, the teasing." Angry, she backed away from Oro. "I know what I look like and I suppose it's fortunate I wasn't born a great beauty, because I would never have earned my place within Lord and Lady Easton's household. It's foolish to be upset about it." Yet, it still hurt.

Mr. Nash stopped grooming Oro. "Who told you that you're not a great beauty?"

Tears blurred her vision. "I don't know. Everyone, I suppose. It's obvious in the way men overlook me. Women have a way of looking at other women—the ones they are not impressed by—and I've been subject to those looks in some of the most beautiful ballrooms in

London.”

“Measuring worth by beauty is a stupid way to do things. Oro is beautiful, but he wouldn’t be worth a lick if he didn’t perform the duties I taught him.” His mouth tightened. “You really believe what those trussed up peacocks think has any bearing on the kind of person you are?”

“I am what they made me. Educated, thank heavens for that. If I can’t be a wife, at least I don’t have to be a chambermaid.”

“Remember, you could be out on the street.” Lady Easton’s sharp voice was like a pinprick. *“Disease-riddled, dead, or worse.”*

Even from a young age, she’d known if she’d remained at the orphan home, she might have been forced into prostitution eventually. No matter how cruelly the peerage treated her, she hadn’t been forced into that.

“But would you be happier if you’d never been introduced to the masters who trampled you and told you that you were only there to make their daughter seem prettier?”

Defeated by the conversation, her shoulders slumped and her spirit flagged. “I don’t know.”

“Camprich hired you sight-unseen. He did it because of the letter Lady Easton wrote. Not because he saw plainness. To be honest, he likely didn’t care what you looked like as long as you were capable of teaching his daughter. They might be off on holiday doing whatever the wealthy do, but make no mistake, they dote on Bethany. They want the best for her, no matter the cost. You were the best they found. Lady Easton handed you a weapon—that education you’re so proud of. Perhaps she didn’t buy you a beau as she did for her daughter, but you ought to thank her for that.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re free to travel England earning a wage and doing whatever you want with it. You’re not tied down with some boring English aristocrat. Forced to go to balls where you know people aren’t impressed with you.”

“I think you’ve missed the point.”

“What?”

“I would like a family. I don’t care for being alone. It would be nice to have someone to share my life with. A husband, children, family. Don’t you miss yours?”

His expression darkened and closed in. “I don’t have a family.”

“No one left in Texas to return home to.” She’d forgotten. “Don’t you get lonely?”

“I have work here to keep me busy. Excuse me. I’m going to turn Oro out.” He left the brush by the tying post, then released the knot holding his horse there. The pair left for the paddock.

She'd offended him. His loose lifestyle without ties meant something to him that she couldn't fathom. Where she'd give anything to get the family she wanted, clearly he chose to run as far from close connections as he could get. So far, that he'd left his own country to escape.

I'm no better. She'd taken a job away from everyone she knew to leave behind what the peerage thought of her. She'd exiled herself to the country for fear of being called ugly. Whatever reasons had caused Mr. Nash to leave America—reasons he chose not to disclose—must be even worse than hers.

Chapter 4

The Highwayman's Club was tucked away off the main road through Upper Enggate, a squat, dark building where men went to drink without worry their womenfolk would come searching. No decent woman would come near the place. The old scents of beer, wood smoke, and tobacco were evident long before a patron reached the door.

Once, it might have been a quaint building with scroll work trim that had long ago lost its paint. The windows were covered in years of grime and mildew had settled where the paint wasn't gone. Overgrown holly bushes nearly obscured the doorway on both sides. If not for the glow of lamps within, it might have been mistaken as an abandoned house.

Not a pleasant place to look at, but the drinks were plentiful. Fletcher slid onto a stool at the bar. The wood was worn smooth from years of visitors. He'd been here often enough to feel as though he wasn't an outsider any longer.

Ade Clark, The Highwayman's Club owner, nodded at Fletcher. "Get you a beer, mate?"

"Sounds good." Fletcher removed his hat, then laid it on the bar. The smell of horse surrounded him, but was muted by spilled beer and the cloy of tobacco. "How's your missus, Ade?"

"Cranky as a bear. Going to have that fourth little one any day now." Ade grinned. "We'll all be glad when it's here."

Fletcher dug his short nails into his palm. "Good luck to all of you."

"How are the baron's horses comin'?" Ade, six and a half feet tall if he was an inch, loomed behind the bar like an oak. He wore the build of a man better suited to shoeing horses than draped in an apron. Hair trimmed to a sheen of fuzz on his big skull had gone grey, but the goatee he wore still ran solid black. An anchor tattooed on his forearm led credence to time in the navy. The tattoo on the opposite arm was a woman's name, blurred from time, though readable. Marion, it read in fancy script.

“About half of them are still lousy. It’s almost as though he bought the ones that don’t want to learn. They want to eat grass all day and would as soon kick you as look at you. I’ve never seen such stubborn beasts.” Fletcher ran his hand through his hair. “Why anyone would leave horses to their own devices for years is beyond me.”

“Because that simple-minded jackdaw Camprich hired before you sat back and drew his wages. Without the lord watching over him, he let the whole place run into the ground. Horses included. Never thought I’d see the day when the lady talked Lord Camprich into leavin’ again.” Ade slid a mug of beer to Fletcher.

“After only a year. She must be persuasive.” He waited for the foamy head to drop down before he took a drink.

“Lady Camprich gets what she wants. That comes as no surprise. She’s strong-minded. It says a lot about you that he left you in charge of his stables.”

“He picked me out, I didn’t come to him.” Why on earth Camprich had selected him from all the men in the world to manage a bunch of unruly thoroughbreds was beyond him. But the decision had probably saved his life.

“Heard he hired a new governess for the little poppet.” Ade wiped dust from the bottles of liquor on the wall. “You meet her yet?”

“Impossible not to. Bethany’s down at the stables every day. The governess tags along like a lost dog. Probably doesn’t realize she’s not there to guard Bethany day and night.”

“Keeps both of them out of trouble.” Ade laughed. “She pretty?”

Fletcher started. “Pretty? Not like Camprich’s wife. There’s nothing aristocratic about her. She dresses rich enough, but she’s only slightly above a servant.”

“That didn’t tell me a damn thing, mate.”

“Why do you care? You’re married.”

“Just curious. She pretty enough that you’ve got an eye on her and don’t want to tell the rest of us?” Ade winked.

He took a long drink of beer, emptied the mug. Once he’d tried to drown his sorrows in it. The effort had only made him sick and mean and useless. “Not in the market.”

“Some people are better off as bachelors. Don’t blame you for enjoyin’ the baron’s hospitality while you can. No hassle of runnin’ your own place. Just do your work and draw your wages. Easy as pie.” He gestured at the empty mug. “You want another?”

“Whisky.”

Ade’s eyebrows went up. “You sure?”

“Tonight, yes. I may regret it in the morning.”

Ade shrugged. “Very well. I’ll leave the bottle, eh?”

“Sounds good.”

Ade dropped a small glass and a bottle on the smooth bar. "You need anything else, give me a shout."

Fletcher needed less time alone with his thoughts. Less time to recall his past. Miss Strange offered a respite. Her story about the kind of people who'd essentially hired her to make their daughter look pretty rubbed him wrong. Who could be so cruel to a child? To give her the ultimatum of standing in another girl's shadow or end up on the streets?

He poured himself a shot. He spent far too much time dwelling on Miss Strange's problems. The drink burned as it went down his throat. Warmth exploded in his middle. Though Miss Strange wasn't a great beauty, she intrigued him. Her face lit up when she smiled. Plain in appearance, she hardly had a personality to match. She'd grown bolder around his horse and it was clear she enjoyed the simple task he'd given her. Someday he might actually get her on Oro's back.

His next shot went down smoother. He turned the shot glass between his thumb and fingers. The few remaining drops of liquor in it were the color of Roslyn's eyes.

His Rosalyn, she'd never been afraid of horses. Of anything. She would wholeheartedly approve of his journey to England—even if it was to forget rather than to enjoy a new place. Like Miss Strange, Rosalyn would have loved Bethany and her fearlessness when it came to the horses.

"You all right, Fletcher?"

He jerked his head up at Ade's voice. "Hmm?"

"You been starin' into that empty glass for a good ten minutes."

"I should get going." He dug in his pocket for change, then dropped it on the bar. "See you."

Ade made no move to collect the change. "You all right to find your way home?"

"I'll be fine. Oro knows the way." The journey wasn't long. Less time than he'd spent drinking tonight. All he had to do was get his leg up over the horse's back. Oro would take care of the rest. He stumbled outside where the horse waited.

Oro snorted and gave him a long look, but didn't move as Fletcher fumbled his way into the saddle.

He let Oro have the reins, but the horse walked along the road at a slow pace. Roslyn and Miss Strange flitted in and out of Fletcher's mind. They'd both be disappointed in him for drinking. It solved nothing and only served to make him tired, nauseous, and cranky in the mornings.

He shouldn't have left Miss Strange in the stable yard so abruptly. Her sudden mention of family upset him. The moments when he couldn't control his grief were few and far between, but her whimsical

wish for someone to share her life with were too much for him today. She meant well, but he'd taken it poorly. His fault, not hers.

"Mr. Nash?" Samuel came out of the barn.

Fletcher glanced around. "Didn't realize I was home already."

"You've been sitting on Oro here for a couple of minutes. Are you all right?" Samuel narrowed his eyes at Fletcher. "Have you been drinking?"

"A little. Will you take care of Oro for me?" The ground seemed farther away than he remembered and he stumbled when his right foot made contact.

"I hope you're off to bed." Samuel took Oro's reins.

Samuel didn't approve of drinking under any circumstances.

"I'm off to see Miss Strange." He took off his hat. "If you'll see to my horse."

"I'll take care of him, but it is getting late, Mr. Nash. You should reconsider seeing Miss Strange in your condition."

"I'm fine. Thank you." He wobbled as he walked, but he owed Miss Strange an apology. She would get it. Tonight. Now.

He put one foot in front of the other and made his way up to the house. Through the servant's entrance at the back. Although he'd been inside this area plenty, he had no idea where they might have stashed Miss Strange. Upstairs, perhaps. His mind swirled like water going down a drain. Was she in bed? Was it too late to call on her?

"Mr. Nash?" Mrs. Lusk came through the doorway that led to the kitchen. "Is everything all right?"

He swayed, though he tried to stand straight. "I'm in need of a moment with Miss Jange."

"Erm, Miss *Strange*, you mean?"

"Yes. Strange. Her. If you'd tell her." He removed his hat and held it in both hands.

"Are you inebriated?" Mrs. Lusk narrowed her eyes. "You seem out of sorts."

"I had a drink or two, but I'm perfectly sorted, ma'am."

"If she wishes to see you, then you can meet in the parlor. Give me a moment to fetch her." Mrs. Lusk turned away. "I hope you mean to make it quick. It's getting rather late."

The parlor. He'd been there on his first visit to the house to finalize the contract Camprich had offered. He hadn't been back since. The outdoors was his domain, not some carpeted, velvet-draped sitting room where rich folk rubbed elbows.

He followed Mrs. Lusk, but instead of going upstairs, he turned for the main part of the manor. The damned thing had so many rooms and they were hardly ever used. It wasn't like Camprich was bothering to fill his house with children.

"I would. Little ones everywhere if I could. That's what Rosalyn wanted." Unexpected tears blurred his vision.

The parlor was dark, but a key on the wall offered gas to fill the lamps. He winced as he turned it up too high. The bright lights tortured his eyes. Not unlike the stage lights in the arenas where he'd performed in the shows.

"Ladies and gentleman, we are proud to present to you one of the fastest guns in the West! Fletcher Nash."

The echo of Wild Bill's voice rang in his head. He'd tear into the arena on Oro's back, shooting at targets as his trusty steed raced past them. Early in his career, he'd never missed. As the drinking took hold, his aim disintegrated faster than the targets.

"Mr. Nash?" Miss Strange entered the parlor. She recoiled when she caught a whiff of him. "Have you been drinking?"

Small in stature, but curvy, the dressing gown she wore closed up to her throat left none of her figure untouched.

"Miss Strange. I have something to say to you."

"This is unusual. It couldn't have waited for tomorrow? I wasn't expecting company. In fact, it's probably improper to meet with you, but I feared something was the matter." Her slender brows drew together over her frown. "It's not Little Dan, is it?"

"It's not the pony. It's us. This couldn't wait. Rosalyn demanded prompt apologies. You're nothing like her."

The frown grew. "I'm sorry? Who is Rosalyn?"

"My wife."

Her nose scrunched and her eyes narrowed. "Your wife? You previously claimed to be single. I'm sorry. This is all very strange and you're not making any sense. There's an odor of liquor about you and I think it's clouding your mind. I'm going to bed. Good night, Mr. Nash."

"She died. In childbirth. Back in Texas." The words tumbled from him. "She was fearless. I don't like to talk about her because..." He tapped his chest. "No one could compare."

A tremble shook her frame and she took a step backward. "I'm still uncertain what this has to do with me. It doesn't matter. Please leave. On your own before I call for someone else to remove you. Don't seek me out again."

"I want to apologize. For earlier when I left so quick. I figured I insulted you. Made you feel like what you want out of life isn't important. Those people who took you into their house, they did the same thing. I'm not like them, Miss Jange—Strange. Rosalyn would have loved you."

"Apology accepted. Please go." She pointed at the doorway.

"I don't think you mean it. You just want me to leave. Jayne." He

took a step toward her. "Hear me out. I feel bad about what I said. That you ought to see the world. You should get married instead. Find a husband, raise some kids. That's what I wanted." *Until Rosalyn died.*

"Oh, yes. I'll run right out and catch a handsome bachelor. I think you've forgotten the part where men are not too impressed with me. Not that it's any of your concern." She folded her arms. "I'm finished with this conversation."

"I'm impressed with you."

She lifted her chin. "You would probably be impressed with a fish right now. That's only the liquor talking. Tomorrow you're going to regret all parts of this evening."

"I only regret talking to you like that and leaving in a huff."

Grey eyes narrowed at him. "I said it's forgiven. We all have off days. Yours seems to have gotten even worse. You need to go to bed."

Although starchy and aloof in her dressing gown, Miss Strange still managed to intrigue him. "Are you offering?"

Her palm cracked against his cheek. He'd taken worse blows, but it caught him off guard enough to turn his head.

"Ouch." He rubbed the offended spot and leaned against the wall. "I'm a rogue, Miss Strange. I thought women liked that."

"Not the sensible ones!" She balled her fists. "You're making a fool of yourself. I am leaving now. Not another word out of you."

Her angry pout drew him like a thirsty horse to water. So much emotion brewed behind the pewter grey of her eyes. He snagged her arm as she passed him. Whirled her into his embrace. Defiant eyes shined up into his, but before she could berate him, he lowered his mouth to hers. Silenced that protest. The flavor of tea lingered on her lips. Miss Strange didn't resist. She pressed closer to him, held the kiss. Her soft lips crushed against his. Though somewhat clumsy, she was passionate.

Lust shocked straight through him. The first time he'd felt that since the last time Rosalyn had kissed him. Ros...

He let his arms drop from her sides.

Miss Strange backed away. "That was—you devil! You're no rogue, but a villain!"

She lifted the hem of her dressing gown, then fled the room.

Fletcher rubbed the spot where her palm had connected with his cheek. He'd played both the hero and the villain in Wild Bill's show. All the grief and drinking had convinced him that he was neither. That without Rosalyn, without their daughter, he was nothing. How could he replace them?

Chapter 5

Jayne yanked her brush through her hair. Her mind reeled with all the things she wanted to say to Fletcher Nash. How dare he grab her like a common strumpet? How dare he kiss her in the parlor where anyone might catch them? The scandal! She had a reputation to maintain. If anyone told her employers about it, she could lose her position.

She'd witnessed the misbehavior of many inebriated men. Mr. Nash's advances were not surprising, but they were hurtful. The things he'd blurted out about his wife and how no woman could compare were sad. But to kiss her after. Jayne shook her head.

This was not some Wild West novel. Some over glorified romance book where they would fall in love and spend the rest of their days together. She couldn't afford to dally with a man, not when her very life depended on this job and the recommendations it might bring.

As much as she wanted a family, it was an unlikely dream.

From here on out, she would send Bethany to the stables on her own. She would never be able to persuade the child to give up her beloved horse, but she couldn't risk further contact with Mr. Nash.

One small kiss wouldn't make her fall in love with him. It couldn't turn her desire for friendship into something else. He hadn't even asked permission, for heaven's sake. Surely a true gentleman would have waited for some sign that a woman was ready to be kissed.

Jayne groaned, folded her arms on the vanity, and rested her forehead on them. If only Lizette were here and they could discuss such things. She might have been only an accessory to Lizette, but they had been friends. Able to discuss romance and handsome men and what hopes they had for the future.

Leave it to her to find the one man in all of England who unsettled her. Her entire evening had been a confused jumble of emotion. She'd barely slept, partly from fear, partly from the annoying desire to kiss him again, and mostly because she should have slapped him again—only harder the second time.

Mr. Nash's name came up repeatedly throughout the day.

Perhaps Jayne had failed to notice before because she'd enjoyed his company, but each time Bethany said it now, she tried not to cringe. No amount of pleading from the little girl could get her to go to the stables. Even as Bethany fumed because Jayne refused to go to see Little Dan or the other horses, she remained steadfast.

Fortunately, Mr. Nash made no attempts to see her again or make any kind of apology. She hoped he suffered shame from the incident... if he even remembered it.

When she sent Bethany out about three weeks after the episode, Mrs. Lusk cornered her.

"I don't know if you're aware, Miss Strange, but Miss Bethany is having her birthday in a month. I had hoped for word that her parents would return in time to help celebrate, but there's been no sign so far. I wondered if you would help us prepare a party for her."

"I would be delighted, Mrs. Lusk. She did mention the day I started that her birthday was coming up. I'm glad I can be of service in helping her celebrate."

Mrs. Lusk beamed. "Very good! I'll assign you a list of duties. Some of them may involve going to town to fetch a few things. You don't mind?"

"No, I'm happy to do it. Whatever we need to make Bethany's birthday a success." Her own birthday hadn't been much of a day to remember. Far be it from her to let a young girl's go to waste.

"Wonderful. I actually had a favor to ask of you today, if you're available." Mrs. Lusk removed a list from her pocket. "Normally I would wait for Mr. Nash to tell me he was going to town, but the cook is in need of a few fresh herbs for supper this evening. He's rather temperamental about not having them."

She froze at the mention of Mr. Nash's name.

Mrs. Lusk pushed the list toward her. "While you're at the shop, could you look for a bottle of the vanilla Miss Bethany likes in her oatmeal? The cook used the last of it this morning."

"Mr. Nash wouldn't be going to Upper Enggate with me?" She folded her fingers around the paper.

"He'll drive the dog cart. I do hope you don't mind. He was certainly out of his head that night he came here looking for you. But there's not a one of us here who thinks he'd do something scandalous.

He's grieving, poor Mr. Nash. Lost his wife a few years ago. The dear thing hasn't recovered well." Mrs. Lusk shook her head. "Lord Camprich brought him here because he has a marvelous reputation for handling horses, but he had a bit of a drinking problem in the beginning."

"It just occurred to me that I need to..." She struggled to think. "I have to plan lessons for tomorrow. Somehow it got away from me. I shouldn't go to town today, Mrs. Lusk. I'm very sorry."

"Oh, please? Miss Bethany won't eat the oatmeal without the vanilla. There's nothing we can use to substitute it."

"Can't someone else go?" Surely someone was available to fulfill the request. "Or perhaps serve her a different breakfast?"

Mrs. Lusk's face fell. "I suppose you're right. She could have any other thing in the morning, but her parents believe oatmeal is best. It sticks to the ribs. And supper will be bland without those herbs, but we've all suffered worse, I'm sure."

Guilt weighed on Jayne's shoulders. "I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Lusk. I would help if I could. You know Bethany's education is as important as any meal."

"How will she ever commit to learning without something in her little belly?"

Jayne had never wanted to use a swear word as much in her life. "Oh, all right. If you're going to insist on it."

Mrs. Lusk's smile brightened the entire room. "Thank you! I'm sorry to push you into it, but I don't feel right about any meal going unflavored. The cook would be so disappointed if no one could go this evening."

"He owes me a favor. I'll be sure to remind him when I return."

"I'll tell him, Miss Strange, although I'm sure he'll be most eager to comply. You've saved supper and breakfast. I'll have one of the helpers run along to inform Mr. Nash to hitch up the dog cart. You should fetch a bonnet to keep the sun from your face."

She'd learned long ago that it was easier to give in to pressure than listen to someone—Lizette—complain. If only anyone other than Mr. Nash was taking her to town. She climbed the steps to her room and fetched the bonnet as Mrs. Lusk had suggested.

Dread settled into her stomach. What if Mr. Nash attempted to kiss her again? They would be alone and anything might happen. Perhaps she could get Bethany to come back from the paddock to accompany them.

She dawdled at the mirror in front of her vanity. Plain Jayne had scarcely looked so dull as she did today. Boring grey dress, though it was a soft muslin, defined her figure. Lady Easton had her fitted for a corset, though Jayne hardly bothered with it. It had given her some

curves, but really, when one was practically a stick straight up and down, it seemed a silly thing to bother with a corset.

The grey cloth made her complexion seem dull. She gave her cheeks a quick pinch, though she looked rather ill instead of invigorated. The bonnet covered her mousy hair. Decorated with only boring white flowers, it did little to improve the brown straw.

Perfect clothing to blend in, to make others stand out. The way she looked Mr. Nash would likely forget she was sitting beside him in the dog cart. Perfect.

She made her way outside, surprised to find Mr. Nash waiting.

He wore his usual garb, a loose-fitting maroon shirt tucked into tan duck pants. A vest and jacket covered his chest. The ever-present cowboy hat sat on his head. He touched the brim and nodded at her. "Miss Strange."

"Mr. Nash." She climbed into the dog cart without help. "I have a list of things to get per Mrs. Lusk's request. I expect this journey to be all business."

"No passing of pleasantries along the way?" Amusement came through his Texas drawl. "I'm hurt."

"I doubt it."

He climbed up beside her, but kept his distance as much as the seat allowed. "I've made an ass of myself. I had no business seeking you out the other night. No business kissing you. I made you uncomfortable."

"You did. You spoke of your wife. I doubt she would have admired your rough nature that night. In fact, I dare say she would have been disappointed in you." Perhaps it was cruel to bring up the woman he so clearly missed.

He set Duff into motion.

"On that account, you're right. Rosalyn would have raised her hand to me if I'd done something so bold and uncouth to her before we married. It was foolish and impulsive. I won't ask for your forgiveness. I don't deserve it. The whole incident must have unsettled you."

"I was unsettled." In more ways than one. "You should refrain from drinking."

He lowered his gaze. "I nearly always do. A beer here or there, but that night I had whisky. It was a poor decision."

"Indeed." She folded her hands together on her lap. "Although, you do have my forgiveness if you promise nothing of the sort will happen again."

"You have my word." He smiled. "Rosalyn would have liked you. You have spirit."

"Thank you. I think. I'm sorry for your loss. It must have taken a

terrible toll on your life to lose her. And your child." She bit her lip. "A son or a daughter?"

"Daughter." He sounded a little hoarse. "She would be younger than Bethany. It both makes me happy and pains me to watch her grow, knowing my girl never got the chance."

"That's why you're so fond of her."

"Yes. She makes it easy to like her. Hard to overlook her. It's helped me get over my grief by assisting her with riding. Teaching her things I can't teach my own child." His knuckles were white on the reins and his eyes appeared moist.

"I can't imagine the pain you feel. Death touches us all in some way. I barely remember my mother. As far as I know, my father was never there. It's not the same as losing the future you must have envisioned. No wonder you left America."

He cleared his throat. "I never planned to. I thought I might stay with Bill Cody until I died. Or drank myself to death, which was the most likely outcome. It seemed a reasonable way to drown my suffering."

What a terrible fate for a man so young. "But Lord Camprich found you."

"During one of my better moments. He'd seen me shooting during a couple of the shows. And I was helping break horses for Cody. Some of them turned out nicely. Nearly as good as Oro. He said I had a way with them and he had a place where a touch like mine was needed."

"You truly had nothing left in Texas? No parents?" She knew what it was like to be alone. And to need to try another place in hopes of making a fresh start.

"My parents are there. I write them often and send money. They weren't surprised to find that I'd left the States again. My father thought it best that I had something to occupy my time. They knew about the drinking. Like you, they didn't approve."

"They must miss you." She doubted Lizette missed her. Not with a new life stretching in front of her.

"I suppose they do, but they're pleased this venture is working out for me. I'd like to stay here as long as I can. Get Camprich's horses straightened out. They're beautiful animals. They only need time to become working animals."

"I have no doubt you'll get them into top shape. The work you've done with Oro amazes me."

"It's easier since I've known him from a colt. Harder with horses that are mistrustful of humans simply because they've been neglected." He scowled. "I'd like to ring the last stable manager's neck. He might have ruined them. You saw how Jenny behaved. Most of them were that wary when I first arrived."

“Regardless, Lord Camprich trusts you. That says a great deal about your character. You are allowed mistakes. I only wanted you to go away because I feared you would do something or say something that would make it impossible for us to remain friends.”

“I did, didn’t I?” His shoulders slumped. “It must have taken a lot of courage for you to join me today.”

“I didn’t want to. Mrs. Lusk all but forced me to do it.”

“You should have refused if you felt that strongly.”

“It’s never done much good to try. All my life the Eastons pushed me into doing things. Sometimes I feel as though I haven’t moved on from there. My life isn’t my own as long as I’m in someone else’s employ, but it’s what I’ve got. At least I know what to expect from it.”

“That’s a sad way of seeing things. I wish you were as capable of having adventure as I was. You should join Cody’s Wild West show.”

She laughed. “As what? A shoe shiner? I don’t have any performing skills. Nor can I shoot. Horses are out, I’m afraid.”

“Can you sing? You could wow the audiences with a little vocal talent.” He smiled. The lines of regret and worry softened until they were gone from his face. Mr. Nash looked carefree again.

“I can’t sing either. I’m out of luck, it seems. Drat.” She shook her head. “No adventures for me.” Unless one counted getting her first kiss from a drunken cowboy in a baron’s parlor. “Although, someday, I might like to try riding a horse. If that horse was as good and tame as Oro or Little Dan.”

He raised his brows, clearly surprised by her admission. “You’ve come to the right person for that. Oro’s yours any time you feel the need to get on a horse. I’d be happy to teach you the fundamentals of horsemanship.”

“Thank you. I make no promises that I will ever be good at it, but Bethany appears to have so much fun, it can’t hurt for me to try.”

“You’re very brave, Miss Strange. I’m sure you’ll manage just fine.”

Their gazes met and a tingle started over Jayne’s skin. Such warmth and sincerity in Mr. Nash’s voice. Aside from his one night indulging in the bottle, he’d never done anything to frighten her. It was for the best that she’d allowed Mrs. Lusk to coerce her into going to town today.

“I shall try my best. I hope Bethany won’t laugh if I fall off the horse.”

“No one will laugh, I promise. But if you do, you have to promise to get on again. Never stay down, Miss Strange.”

“Jayne.” It tumbled from her lips. “You may call me Jayne when we’re in private.”

His mouth turned up and the sunlight hitting his face brightened his eyes. “Call you by your given name. Well, how about that? You

can call me Fletcher.”

“It’s a deal. I’m glad we’re friends again.”

He shifted the reins to one hand, then offered his free one. “I missed seeing you down at the stables.”

She slipped her hand into his. His hand contained warmth and strength in the gentle grip. “I must admit, I missed going. There’s something nice about it down there. Perhaps it’s just the sounds or the way it’s different than the things I’m accustomed to. I’m sure I would have been a good horsewoman had anyone at the Easton’s residence cared about horses.”

“I have no doubt. And no doubt that you will be yet.” He took back his hand. “Say, did Mrs. Lusk tell you about Bethany’s birthday?”

“She did, and asked me to help with the preparations. I’m excited to be a part of it.” Whatever she could do to make Bethany’s birthday better, she’d see it done. “Were her parents here last year? It seems as though they travel often.”

Fletcher’s smile failed. “They weren’t. Bethany was disappointed, but she understands her father has business contacts on the Continent and that her mother prefers to be with him. She’s mature for a girl so young.”

“Then we shall have to do our best to make this an unforgettable birthday for her. I understand being alone on your birthday. It’s no fun.” At least she’d received a warm welcome to Camprich Manor that day.

“No one celebrated with you on your last birthday? The Eastons didn’t host a dinner or something for you?”

“I’d left them already. That was the day I came here. It hardly seemed appropriate to mention that I’d just gained another year to perfect stranger.”

His mouth opened, but it took him a moment to recover. “You should have said *something*.”

“Hello, my name is Strange and I’m having a birthday?” She nudged him with her elbow. “That would have been quite the introduction.”

“If nothing else, we could have had cake the next day. I’m sorry you had to travel so far on your birthday. Especially that the Eastons didn’t keep you around long enough to have a celebration. Another strike against them.” He frowned. “We can do better than that.”

He made too much fuss about it. It wasn’t as though she’d ever had a grand party like Lizette. How could one miss what one never had? “Don’t think of it that way. Their daughter had just gotten married. They were sending her off to live in another household. It was bittersweet for them, don’t you think?”

“I think it was mean-spirited of them to bring you up alongside

her, but not give you the same treatment. You weren't a stray puppy." He reined Duff in as they approached town. "I understand why you tolerated that treatment, but it doesn't mean I have to approve of it. They didn't give you a gift of any kind?"

Nothing personal. No pretty new jewelry or special trinket. No hand-me-down heirlooms like Lizette had received for her wedding treasury. "My entire wardrobe and some money for savings. It seemed generous considering they sheltered and clothed me for years."

"Generous. They probably could have sold your selection of grey and lavender gowns to some other servant." He made an annoyed noise. "If I ever meet them, so help me."

"I'm grateful for everything I did get."

"It's pitiful."

They rolled to a stop in front of the general merchandise shop.

Jayne took the list from her handbag. "There are a few things I need to get. Are you coming in with me or do you have business elsewhere?" Hopefully not at the pub where he'd spent the other evening.

"I need a few things inside." He stepped out of the dog cart, then rounded the other side to help her. "I hope they have all those herbs the cook needs. Heaven forbid we get back without dill weed or marjoram or whatever he wants. I couldn't tell you the difference."

Fletcher offered his arm and she gladly took it. He was several inches taller than her, but she didn't have to crane her neck to an unpleasant angle to look up at him. It was comfortable. And nice having a man by her side.

A little bell tinkled when he got the door for her.

The pleasant-faced woman at the desk smiled in greeting. "Welcome. Hello, Mr. Nash. And who is this with you?"

"This is Miss Strange. She's the new governess at Camprich Manor. We're in need of a few things to stock the kitchen pantry."

"I'll certainly try to help. It's lovely to meet you, Miss Strange." The woman held out her hand for the list. "I'm Miss Cavendish. This shouldn't take me too long. Perhaps twenty minutes. Please let me know if there's anything else I can get for you." She hurried off to fulfill the list.

"Care to look around?" Fletcher nodded at the shop interior. "They have novelty items, books, material, just about anything you need."

Jayne nodded. They had time to fill while Miss Cavendish got the order. "Certainly. I need to find a birthday present for Bethany."

"Anything with a horse on it will do for her. Although I thought she could do with a different animal. Her folks would never go for an inside dog, but she might like a rabbit." Fletcher tucked his hands behind his back as he looked at the shelves packed with items.

“Aren’t rabbits food?”

“Showing and breeding them for color is gaining popularity. I think Bethany would find it an interesting hobby.” He picked up a shoe shine brush. “I have a friend who breeds Dutch rabbits. They’re black and white and stay small.”

The idea of a pet rabbit was foreign, but the wild ones she saw were adorable. “It sounds as though you’ve given this a great deal of thought. Perhaps I should buy the materials for the rabbit housing. Surely you don’t expect it to run about the paddock with the horses.”

He laughed. “I’ve already got that arranged too. The hostlers are helping me build it a shelter.”

“Then I suppose I’m on my own to find her a gift.” A book was too obvious and boring. Bethany seemed to have no interest in dolls. Another thoughtless gift. Bows and ribbons were too common a gift. “Perhaps jewelry?”

“Anything with a horse.” Fletcher winked.

Her gaze fell on a paint kit. She lifted the hinged lid. An array of paints and brushes lined the tray. A drawer on the bottom contained a small palette.

“Can you paint?”

She nodded. “Very well. Lizette never took to it, but I enjoyed the lessons.”

He touched one of the little paint brushes. “You think you could teach Bethany to paint?”

“I could try. I’ve seen her draw. She could be good with some practice. I would like to paint a portrait of her with Little Dan. Do you think she might like it?”

The kit contained a variety of colors. More than enough to paint a girl and a pony.

“I think she’ll like anything you give her. She admires you greatly, Jayne. If you painted something terrible, I believe she’d like it.”

“Then I’ll buy a kit for myself and for her. Perhaps she’ll be able to learn to paint and enjoy it. We might spend more together doing still lifes and landscapes.” If she could get him to stand still long enough, she might be able to paint a certain cowboy.

She spent the remainder of the time looking through books and wistfully wishing she could afford the price of new dresses. Anything besides grey and lavender.

“Pink would look good on you.” Fletcher stepped up beside her. “Not that bright one. The light one that’s soft. Any of the light colors. This mint green. Maybe not the yellow. It won’t go with your complexion.”

“I can’t buy material right now. I have savings, but it’s not for items I don’t need. I have an entire bureau full of gowns.”

“Sensible. A very good virtue for a governess.” Fletcher nodded. “I think Miss Cavendish is almost finished. You ready to pay?”

“I believe so.” She carried the paint kits to the counter. “I hope she’s pleased with my choice of gift. I don’t want to see her disappointed.”

“She’ll love it. Probably not as much as my rabbit.” He pulled out some money while Miss Cavendish rang up the purchases for the manor.

“We can’t all give her live animals. She would be overrun with them if that were the case.”

“Seeing her smile is rewarding.” Some of the humor faded from Fletcher’s expression. “Makes me feel like I’m teaching her something valuable when she takes care of her pony. The rabbit too. I admire people who are kind to animals. I hope whatever I teach her makes a difference and matters.”

She paid for the kits and waited for Miss Cavendish to wrap them. “It does. You have purpose. She appreciates you for it.”

“I used to wonder whether I did have a purpose.” He gathered the purchases. “Life makes more sense when you know your place.”

They left the shop and stepped into the street again.

“I have to agree with you about that. Whatever you might believe about the Eastons, being a companion to Lizette taught me compassion and kindness. Even when people didn’t show it to me, I realized how important it is to treat others as though they matter.”

“You do matter, Jayne.” He smiled. “No matter what anyone else says or thinks. I’m grateful you were able to forgive me.”

Perhaps you should learn to forgive yourself. Let go of what you couldn’t do to save your wife and child. “It’s really more for Bethany’s sake than either of ours.”

“The little girl at the heart of the matter.” He nodded and placed their purchases in the back of the cart before he came to help her into the seat.

“You’re going to help me make this her best birthday yet, aren’t you? Rabbit aside?”

“Yes, ma’am. A birthday party with all the fun a girl can imagine.”

Chapter 6

Rather than let Bethany's maid wake her, Jayne crept into

Bethany's room and yanked the curtains back so that the crisp yellow walls were awash with light.

"Best of birthdays!" She shook the bedframe. "It's time to get up and have breakfast. We have a full day of adventuresome things to do."

Bethany blinked sleepily. "I was dreaming that Little Dan could fly. He'd grown wings, but he wouldn't come down to let me ride him."

The girl was horse mad. Jayne couldn't help laughing. "He would never do such a thing."

"He would be quite fast if he could fly. Fast enough to keep up with Oro." Bethany sat up. "Where's Miss Emma? I have to get dressed. We must go down to see the horses before my party. I want to give them apples."

"We'll have time. I'll summon Miss Emma for you, but I wanted to be first to wish you a happy birthday."

Bethany climbed out of bed, then wrapped her arms around Jayne's waist. "Thank you. You're a very kind friend, Miss Jayne. I'm so glad you've come to stay here."

"I'm so very glad we get along well. I'll see you downstairs for breakfast." Jayne left the room. She nodded to Emma, who had waited outside.

Then she went to wait at the foot of the staircase. They wouldn't be going to the dining room. Not with the weather as beautiful as the birthday girl. Fletcher waited in the garden with Oro and Little Dan staked to the grass. Hopefully he was able to keep them out of the flowers or the gardener might threaten them all with his rake.

It was several minutes before Bethany came down the stairs. Dressed in blue muslin with a white pinafore and a matching bow in her red hair. "I thought we were meeting at the table?"

"Well, turns out there's been a change of plans. Come with me." Jayne motioned toward the front door.

"But I'm hungry. Aren't we going to get something to eat?"

Bethany's nose scrunched with her puzzlement.

"Soon, soon. You're going to want to see this." Jayne ushered her out the door.

They walked to the gardens. Dew covered the lawn, sparkling like diamonds. Among the flowers, Oro gleamed bright as his name. Earlier, Jayne had braided Little Dan's mane and woven ribbons into his mane and tail.

Fletcher grinned and waved.

Bethany's eyes rounded. "What are they doing out here?"

"We're all having breakfast together. Do you like it?"

"I wish I could have breakfast with Little Dan and Oro every day." Bethany approached them. Her mouth opened as she took in Little Dan again. "Is that a new saddle?"

Fletcher nodded. "Your father ordered it a while back. I had to keep it in my house so you wouldn't come across it."

She ran her hand over the smooth leather. "It's beautiful. Miss Jayne, did you braid his hair?"

"I did. Wasn't that brave of me? Fortunately Little Dan was patient. Sit down on the blanket and let's eat. I've worked up a hunger this morning."

Fletcher joined them. He removed his hat, letting the sun shine down on his dark hair. "Happy birthday, Bethany. I can't believe you're already ten years old. You're growing every day. You were just a runt of a thing when I came here."

Bethany grinned. "Big enough to need a running horse of my own soon?"

"That depends on your father and whether you're good in Miss Jayne's lessons. What's for breakfast? Not only did Miss Jayne get up early to make Little Dan pretty, I got up early too so Oro would be extra shiny."

"They both look so handsome. Thank you. I'm so pleased with this surprise."

Jayne exchanged a look with Fletcher. *Just wait. You've got quite the day ahead of you.*

He winked at her before helping himself to the dishes laid out on the blanket.

After they ate, Fletcher checked Little Dan's saddle again, then told Bethany to try it out. While Bethany tore across the yard in her new saddle, he brought out the cage he'd built.

Jayne held the small black and white rabbit. It sat in her arms,

unexcited by the activity. "Is it a boy rabbit or a girl rabbit?"

Fletcher laughed. "Buck or doe. This one is a doe."

"She's darling. She hasn't bitten me once."

Her fur was soft and appeared clean. She smelled of sweet hay.

"I find the calmest animals I can for the kid. This one was hand-raised and handled every day by children. I didn't pull it out of the forest." He held out his arms for the rabbit. "You ready to give it up?"

Jayne ran her hand across the fur once more. "I almost wish I could keep her myself. It's a good thing I can come visit any time I like."

"Where else will you find a job where you can come out and play with rabbits or horses?" Fletcher took the animal and put it inside the enclosure. "I think Bethany's had a good morning, don't you?"

"I wish I was able to capture her face when she saw the horses. She was so surprised. I loved it."

"You should have seen your own face when you saw hers. I thought your face would crack from smiling so much. You were radiant."

Her face warmed. "I doubt that. I've never been called any such thing."

"I wouldn't lie about it." His voice softened. "You are uniquely beautiful."

"I think you've had too much sun." But it pleased her that he said so.

"There's a gentleness about you that makes me feel happy. Almost light-hearted. You put people at ease, Jayne. That's nothing to dismiss. Before I met you, I felt as though my life was monotonous. Bethany brightened it when she came to visit, but you make the clouds break away every time I think of you."

His earnest words touched her heart. "I'm happy that I can make you feel better." Could she tell him that he made her happy too? Just with the thought of him? "I look forward to visiting with you more than any other part of my day. I must admit, I never thought I would become friends with an American cowboy, but I'm glad it happened."

His face clouded for a moment.

"Did I offend you?" She drew back, ashamed.

"It's not that. I'm just sorry that..." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"That?"

"I'd take you out if I were able. Court you if it wouldn't cause trouble. I know that it would. I don't want to endanger your position. That's never been my intention."

"You would court me?" Incredulous. A man as handsome as him. "That's flattering, Fletcher."

He scuffed his boot across the grass, careful not to dislodge it. "It's

the truth.”

Fletcher, broken-hearted from his past, admitting he cared for her. There could be no worse timing. It was unfair that her position demanded she remain single when a man finally showed interest in her.

“Then we shall have to remain close friends. It’s the best we can do and I will treasure the knowledge that you have said such lovely things to me.”

“I wish I could be more to you. Perhaps if you ever grow tired of Bethany...” He nodded toward her. “Although I expect you could spend every day with her and never grow tired of her unless you heard too much about horses.”

“Even then, I could distract her with another topic.” She sighed. “I hope our friendship will last a long time.”

“Me too.” He put his hand on top of the rabbit enclosure. “Suppose I’d better call her back in so I can give her this gift before you two go in to start setting up for her real party.”

With Mrs. Lusk’s help, they had arranged to invite from children from Upper Enggate. Jayne hoped to invite those children more often so Bethany could make friends. Some of the servants’ children were also coming. It might be the grandest event they got to attend. Jayne hoped it would teach Bethany compassion for children who didn’t share her advantages.

“You should come in when you can. We’re having a vanilla cake filled with strawberry jam. The cook is putting it together right now. I can hardly wait to taste it.” She moved closer to him, under the pretense of looking at the rabbit again, but she brushed her fingers against his. “Will you try to make it?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

His intense gaze made her flesh prickle with want of a simple kiss.

“Then I’ll save you a piece of cake. There will be ice cream too.”

“Sounds good.” He moved away. “I have to bring Bethany back before I give in and kiss you.”

I wish we could take that chance. She nodded. “I’m going inside. Send her in when she’s finished grooming Little Dan. We have a lot to do.”

“Will do.” He touched the brim of his hat, then turned away.



Exhausted from the festivities, Jayne bid Bethany goodnight, then started up the stairs to her room.

"Miss Strange?" Mrs. Lusk stood at the base of the staircase.

"Yes?" She turned.

"Mr. Nash is in the parlor. He wondered if he could have a moment of your time."

"Of course. I'll go there now. Thank you." She lifted her skirt and descended again.

The parlor doors were open and Fletcher stood before the fireplace, gazing at the portraits over the mantle. His head was bare and his hair was ruffled. Fletcher added a bit of wildness to the domestic scenery.

"Fletcher? You asked to see me?"

He turned. A smile lit up his face. "Sorry to bother you. I know you must be worn out from all the visitors today. I just wanted to give you something."

"Me? Whatever for?"

"Remember the day we went to town and you mentioned your birthday had passed?" He removed a small box from the mantle. "I wanted to get you something. You worked hard on getting everything ready for Bethany. You deserve a gift."

Surprised, she didn't know what to say.

"Well, go on." He held it out.

Jayne crossed the floor to accept the box. "You didn't have to."

"I know."

She untied the string holding the box closed, then removed the lid. A shining gold locket gleamed from the velvet interior of the box. The front was engraved with a rose in full bloom and two small buds. "It's gorgeous. You really shouldn't have. It's too much."

The slow grin that spread across his face was as handsome as the locket. "You want to try it on?"

"I do." She lifted it from the box and held it out to him. "Is jewelry an appropriate gift between friends?"

"For a birthday gift, I think so." He unfastened the clasp. "Turn around."

She did as asked. The chain looped around her neck, then he closed the ends together.

She faced him again. "How does it look?"

"Remarkable." He held her gaze.

A smile took over her mouth. "You aren't speaking about the locket."

“No, I’m not.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Happy birthday, Jayne. I wish it could have gone better for you. Surrounded by those you love and who love you in return. This is the best I could do.”

“This is the nicest thing anyone has done for me. Even above the things the Eastons did.” She touched the cool gold. “I like it very much. I like you too.” A pity her gift couldn’t be accompanied by a real kiss.

He took her hand. “I’ll let you go to bed now. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

His fingers entwined with hers. “One last thing.”

“What?”

He pulled her closer to him with his free hand. Fletcher’s mouth descended on hers.

Heat poured through Jayne like summer sunshine as Fletcher deepened the kiss. His free hand wound into her hair. A shiver rolled over her. The crush of his lips made her lean into him. Breathless, she drew back, but couldn’t stay away. She stretched on her toes to reach him.

He gave her a quick brush of lips. “Happy birthday. I have to go before someone sees us.”

Her heart thudded hard as he left.

Well, the kiss was no new saddle or a rabbit, but the feelings he left her with were worth more than all the expensive presents anyone could shower on her.

Chapter 7

“**Y**ou won’t let go?” Jayne hesitated on the mounting block.

Oro huffed out a breath.

“I’ll be holding him the whole time. I promise.” Fletcher held Oro’s bridle and patted the horse with his free hand. “Even if I didn’t, he’s not going to take off. He knows better.”

The sky was overcast, the wind a little chilly. “It might rain. Perhaps we should wait for a better day.” Jayne stepped down from the mounting block. “I don’t wish to get wet.”

“Miss Jayne.” Bethany groaned. “Stop being such a scaredy-cat. Oro is the best horse to learn to ride on.”

“Don’t pressure her, Bethany. You know it won’t help. Miss Jayne has to do it when she’s ready. If she needs a few moments, then you can take Oro across the paddock.” He let go of the bridle to help Bethany into the saddle.

She settled in, took the reins, then clucked her tongue to get the horse moving. They sailed across the pasture with Bethany’s laughter ringing across the grassy landscape.

“I’m sorry. I’m a coward.” Jayne’s hands shook. She tucked them behind her back. “At least Bethany can enjoy riding him for a while.”

“You’re not a coward. Being afraid isn’t something to be ashamed of. You just aren’t ready for the next step yet. You’ll get there.” Fletcher leaned against the paddock fence and folded his arms on the top rail. “Give yourself time to get used to the idea of riding. There’s no rush.”

Bethany and Oro were a striking pair, red and gold against the green grass and the grey sky. Two vibrant creatures outrunning day-to-day problems.

“I wish I had her confidence.” Jayne shook her head. “She’s fearless.”

Fletcher sighed. “She hasn’t known difficulty or hardship. She’s lucky in that, but when some bad news strikes, it’s going to be hard for her to adjust.”

“Then we’ll have to help her along the best we can. That’s my job,

after all, to make sure she grows up capable and well-educated.”

Fletcher moved closer to her. “If she comes out like you, the world will be richer for it.”

Warmth spread up her face. “I’m pleased you think I make a positive influence. I am teaching her science, you know. It’s frowned on in some circles. I daresay if her mother and father knew, I might be thrown out on my ear.”

“Oh, dear. Science. She might learn to form her own opinions. She might become a suffragette.” He pressed his hand to his chest in mock horror. “You forward-thinking heathen.”

“Some people would think so.” She frowned. “Lady Easton wouldn’t hear of such a thing. She said women should be quiet, stay home, and manage their households.”

“There are four territories in the States that allow women to vote. Women can be doctors. They can do more than sew and cook and order servants around. In Cody’s show, plenty of females could outshoot the men. Annie Oakley, for one. She’s hell with a gun and still manages to be a lady.”

“Don’t tell Bethany about her. She already has it in her mind that she’s going to travel the world and never marry. Her parents will be aghast if they think I taught her that’s all right.” She leaned on the fence next to him. “I can’t imagine what a woman should vote for. The president of your country?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Him, other officials. For rights of their own.”

“I would encourage that, except Lady Camprich might prefer I didn’t.”

“You always let others influence your opinions?”

Fletcher was close. The scents of the barn clung to him, though not unpleasantly. Hay, dirt, horse. Irresistible scents she’d never noticed before meeting him.

“I parrot what my superiors tell me. The popular opinion has served me well.”

“Be honest. You think women should vote?” His olive-green eyes searched her face.

“If they like. If the issue is important. I honestly think I might try if I thought my vote could change something for the better.” She swallowed. “But I won’t create a fuss about it. It would go against the things I was taught.”

“Sometimes I’d like to strip those things you were taught right off of you.”

Her palms grew slick. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

The things Lady Easton had said to her about her looks, about her station with the Eastons.

“They didn’t harm me. Her letter of reference earned me a position here. I’m happy here. Isn’t that what matters?”

“It doesn’t hurt.” He turned his gaze toward Bethany again. Waved for her to return to the gate. “Are you going to get on that horse today?”

Her knees weakened. “I don’t believe so.”

“Chicken.” He softened the word with a grin. “One of these days, we’ll get you up there.”

“When I find my courage.” If she ever did.

He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his dark hair. “I think it’s kind of like that material we looked at in the shop. You want a taste of what being a little different is like, but you’re afraid you’ll like it, and then someone will yank it away from you.”

“That is untrue. I’m not afraid of having anything taken away but my job.” And the feelings that blossomed when Fletcher turned his radiant smile on her. He was far too broken up about his wife to want another. Many men and women remarried, but he didn’t seem the sort. He’d made a life—lonely though it seemed—here and appeared content with it.

“And horses.” He let himself through the gate to collect Oro as Bethany brought the golden steed to a stop.

“Fine. I’m a little afraid of horses as well.”

“Did you see us out there, Miss Jayne? You could be free as a bird upon his back if you would only try to get on him.” Bethany’s blue eyes glowed with happiness. “You really should take him around the paddock at least once. He’s so fluid. Like molten gold. He responds to commands as though he can hear your thoughts.”

“What if I fall off?” The horse wasn’t too tall, but tumbling from his back, even on the grass, would embarrass her even if it didn’t cause her injury.

“You get up and get on again.” Bethany’s brow furrowed. “Unless you’re seriously hurt, in which case, it’s acceptable to quit for the day.”

Jayne laughed. Bethany’s words were so earnest.

“Just for a couple of minutes, Miss Jayne?” Fletcher’s smile beckoned. “Sit on his back? I won’t let him move unless you tell me to.”

“The pair of you are relentless. All right. I will sit on his back and he will remain still as a statue the entire time.” She wagged her finger. “No movement.”

“Cross my heart.” Fletcher led the gelding out of the paddock, back to the mounting block.

She climbed on it, then put one foot in the stirrup the way Bethany had. She held her breath as she settled into the leather seat. Her heart

raced so hard, her chest ached.

Oro stood quietly, his ears and tail twitching, but all four feet remained on the ground.

"Well?" Bethany looked up at Jayne.

"It's very high." Her voice came out squeaky. "Higher than I imagined."

Fletcher stroked his hand down Oro's neck. "Do you think you'll be able to tolerate a few steps inside the paddock?"

She nodded stiffly. "I can try."

"Good girl." He led Oro through the gate.

Jayne clutched the reins and part of Oro's mane, though neither would be a great help if she slid over his side. His big hooves would trample her to dust if she got beneath them. Her throat dried. "Oh, goodness."

"Stay calm. He's going as slow as he can." He led Oro in a small circle inside the pen. "You comfortable, Jayne?"

"Not really." She felt each step, each shift of big muscle and bone of an animal that could easily decide he no longer cared for a rider on his back.

"Do you need to get down?" Fletcher watched her closely. "No sense overdoing it."

Bethany, at ten years old, rode this horse as though they were an extension of one another. Fletcher guided the animal. If he believed any harm would come to the rider on Oro's back, he would never allow anyone on the horse.

"We could take another minute. We're getting used to one another." Her voice shook a little, but she put her faith in Fletcher and his horse.

"Take all the time you need." Fletcher's voice was gentle and encouraging. "He doesn't mind."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You can let go."

Fletcher's brow rose. "You sure?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Here you go. If you want him to turn, pull gently in on one rein or the other. He has a sensitive mouth. Give him a nudge with your foot on the direction you want him to go. Oro won't let you down." Fletcher let go of the bridle and stepped back.

"My heavens."

The horse stood still, but his eye remained on Fletcher.

"Nudge both sides if you want to go forward."

"All right," she whispered. "Let's go, Oro." She gave him a little tap with her heels.

He took a few steps, big body shifting as they went farther into the paddock. Gently, slowly, and when she pulled back a bit, he stopped

altogether.

She indicated he should turn right and he did, walking beside the fence. He responded as though she'd been riding him since he was broke to saddle.

"Isn't it amazing?" She laughed as they made their way back to Fletcher. "I'm doing it."

"Well done, Miss Jayne." Fletcher put his hands on his hips. "You're a horsewoman."

"I knew you had it in you." Bethany clapped from near the gate. "Next time you should try trotting."

"Let's have a few more lessons before we attempt anything more challenging. Best not to jump in all at once."

"Sage advice." Fletcher took the reins from her. "Do you need help getting down?"

"Please. It's far."

"I'll go get the brushes so we can groom him." Bethany ran for the stables.

Fletcher put his hands around Jayne's waist and lifted her from the saddle.

Warmth tingled through her as she landed on her feet. She met Fletcher's gaze.

His sun-tanned face still held the smile, but something else lingered in his eyes.

She licked her lips. Lips he'd kissed not so long ago in a moment of impulsiveness. Not a trait she could ever be accused of.

"You did well, Jayne." He stepped back, releasing her from his grip.

"All in a day's work." She dusted off her skirt. "Thank you for having patience with me."

"You did the same for me, remember?" He scratched Oro's jaw. "You looked beautiful sitting up there."

Some of her elation fell away. "I've never looked beautiful doing anything."

"Whoever told you that lied." He moved closer to her again. "Your looks are nothing to be ashamed of. You're beautiful inside and out. Your smile makes me happy. Makes me remember what it was like to share laughter with a woman. It's strong and bright."

He lifted his hand to cup her face. "You are not plain, Jayne. You're as unique as every star, every seashell, every stone."

Her heart pounded. Fletcher's touch made her knees soft. "I'm not special."

"Oh, but you are." His lips grazed hers.

Jayne's breath caught. She stretched up to deepen the kiss and press herself against him. His arms circled her waist and she fit

against him perfectly. The fear and anxiety vanished with his touch.

She pulled back from the kiss to gaze at him. "Fletcher..."

"I overstepped again, didn't I?" He backed away. "I'm sorry, Jayne. That was inappropriate. You are so befuddling. Even when I know I shouldn't touch you, I can't resist."

They were alone at the paddock, not a soul to see them. As recklessly as she threw her reputation around, they were bound to get caught soon. She lowered her chin, unable to meet his eyes. "It was partly my fault too. Please don't feel guilty."

"This is damnably frustrating." He removed his hat and turned it in his hands. "I like you a great deal. I have my reservations about becoming involved with women. Losing Roslyn left me impossibly empty. It's taken me a long time to become comfortable with the notion of courting another woman. And the one I want is the one out of my reach. I don't mean to put your position in jeopardy."

"We will have to endeavor to contain ourselves. I'll do better in the future. It's not only me I worry for, but you and Bethany. There's enough upheaval in her world without bringing governesses in and out. I worry that the lord might not like you dallying with the other employees here. I wouldn't like to get both of us terminated."

"I agree. It's best if we stay friends." He settled his hat on his head again. "Wonder where Bethany got off to?"

Thank heavens she hadn't come upon them while they were kissing. It would have been too difficult to explain. "I'll go see."

She made her way to the rock stable.

Galen had Jenny loosely tied while he cleaned her hooves.

She cast a wary eye at Jayne.

Getting close to Oro was one thing, but the half wild mare was entirely different. Jayne approached with caution while the horse's ears flicked and her nostrils flared.

"Hello, Miss Strange." Galen put Jenny's hoof down. "Can I help you with something?"

"Have you seen Bethany?"

The mare shied at a bird that dove close. She yanked her lead and the knot slipped.

"Jenny, no." Galen reached for the lead, but missed.

Jenny bolted, her dark mane and tail flying, her red hide flashing like fire as her long legs carried her across the ground.

Jayne froze. Her breath caught. Before she could move, Jenny's massive shoulder connected with hers. The force spun Jayne away and she fell to the ground.

"Miss Strange!" Galen raced to her side, but he stared after the mare. "Mr. Nash is going to be furious."

Jayne bit the inside of her lip. Pain flared hot and throbbing in her

shoulder. "You had better try to catch her."

"I'll fetch Mr. Nash for you." Quick as Jenny, he darted away.

Bethany came running, dropping the brushes she'd gone after. Her ivory skin had gone a shade whiter. "Miss Jayne, are you hurt?"

Jayne sat up and pressed her right hand to her left shoulder. "She only clipped me. I don't think I'm too badly injured." But when she tried to move her left arm, she had to bite back a whimper.

Fletcher ran across the grass, then got to one knee before her. "Where are you hurt?"

"Don't make a fuss. Help me up. It's dreadfully embarrassing to be on the ground like this." She held out her right hand for him to take. "Please, Fletcher."

Bethany's eyes filled with tears. "I saw it, Mr. Nash. The horse nearly ran her right over. She's going to be all right, won't she?"

Fletcher met Bethany's gaze. "Don't cry. Run up to the house and tell Mrs. Lusk I need some comfrey salve. You have her or the footman bring it down to my house. Stay up there. I'll send Miss Jayne back as soon as I'm sure she's fine."

"I want to stay with Miss Jayne." Bethany's lower lip slid out. "Please?"

"Now go on and do what I told you. It's no time to be stubborn."

Bethany sniffled. "I will."

"Good girl." Fletcher slipped his hand around Jayne's. "Up we go. Carefully."

She sucked in a breath as he helped her to her feet. She was steady, but suddenly finding her way into bed didn't seem like such a bad idea. "I think I can make it back to the manor if we go slowly."

"My house is closer. Just beyond the stables there." He nodded. "Now tell me, what's the trouble?"

"I think I was more scared than anything. It's only my shoulder and my side a bit. It's nothing too serious." She trembled, which did nothing to help her pain. "There's really no reason to worry."

"Nine hundred pounds of horse tried to run over you. I'm worried. Can you walk?"

"I'm standing. Of course I can walk. Did someone catch the horse? It would be a pity if she injured herself again."

"Don't worry about the horse. Come with me." He kept a slow pace and a sharp eye on her as though he feared she'd topple over.

"I'm worried about the horse. Lord Camprich might not care that his daughter's governess is fine if his horse has a broken leg."

"Samuel and Galen will catch her."

He led her to a small stone cottage that matched the stables nicely. It was barren of the flowers that graced the manor, save for a growth of dark green ivy up one wall.

"You aren't going to hurt her because of what she did? She was frightened by a bird." The ache in her shoulder grew with every step.

"I'm not going to hurt her. I never have and I never will." He opened the door for her. "Go in, sit down on the sofa."

The walls were whitewashed, brilliantly gleaming, and the wooden floors were shiny and swept. The sofa and two arm chairs were arranged around an empty fireplace. Big windows gave a view of the paddocks. A staircase dominated one wall and held a doorway.

"The kitchen is through there. It doesn't see much use from the likes of me." He ducked through the doorway.

Jayne lowered herself to the sofa. Curiosity got the better of her shock. The room seemed devoid of personal touches. The manor proudly displayed portraits of Lord Camprich's family, including a fairly recent painting of his daughter. Here, one lonely photograph of Oro graced the mantle. It leaned against a glass lamp.

The cottage barely seemed lived in.

"I had no idea you had a cottage."

Fletcher returned with a damp cloth. "Where did you think I lived? In the barn with Oro?" He managed a smile, then held out the cloth. "You've got dirt on your face."

She raised her hand to touch it, then winced as her shoulder pulled. "Ouch."

"Does it feel broken?" His face pinched with concern. He dabbed at her face with the cloth.

She leaned away from his ministrations. "I've never had a broken bone. I couldn't say, but I don't think it's too serious. A bruise. Really, Fletcher. I'll survive."

"Let me see." He lowered himself beside her. "For reassurance that you're as hardy as an oak and not a breakable porcelain doll."

She grasped her blouse collar with her good hand. "Certainly not."

"I sent Bethany to get the comfrey salve. You're going to have to let someone rub it on."

"Mrs. Lusk will do it." She had no intentions of removing her blouse in front of him.

A knock at the door startled her.

Fletcher rose to answer it. "Come in, Charlie."

Camprich's footman, Charlie, stepped through the open doorway. "I heard there was an accident. Miss Bethany was near beside herself. Mrs. Lusk sent the comfrey. Is there anything else we can do? Should we send for the physician?"

"That's not necessary. I'm not badly hurt. If you would please pass that information along to Mrs. Lusk so she can tell Bethany. It was more frightening than anything." Jayne rose and braced her arm on the sofa. "I'll be returning to the manor momentarily."

"I'm glad you're not hurt too badly, Miss Strange. Miss Bethany and Mrs. Lusk will be relieved to hear it." Charlie passed the tin of salve to Fletcher. "Sir."

Fletcher shut the door behind the footman. He held up the salve. "This will help heal any bruising. You need to apply it a couple of times a day."

"I'll be sure to do that." Exhaustion weakened her knees. "Might I have a cup of tea before I return to the house? I'm in need of some comfort before I make my way back. That was a bit too much horse for me, I'm afraid."

He moved closer when she dropped onto the sofa. "You're pale as a fish belly."

"What a lovely comparison. I'm not in need of the physician. Just tea."

"Please let me have a look. So I can reassure myself that you're not being brave and trying to save face."

"Bother. If it makes you feel better, you can rub some of that stinking comfrey on my shoulder. Though I assure you, I'm not the least bit faint. I believe you have honorable intentions, so please don't prove otherwise." She unfastened the buttons on the collar of her white blouse and worked her way down, though she left it tucked into her dark grey skirt. Her chemise offered plenty of coverage.

Fletcher, gentleman cowboy, cast his eyes down until she cleared her throat. He grimaced when his gaze landed on her arm. "That's going to be a dark bruise."

He touched the tender flesh and she bit the end of her tongue to stifle a groan. He uncapped the tin of salve, scooped out a bit, then rubbed it onto her skin. His hand crept beneath the edge of her chemise. Fingertips smoothed over the top of her breast.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm not sure where to put this."

"You're doing fine." Her heartbeat quickened. The concern on his face made her ache to lean into him. To allow Fletcher to steal her pain away with his touch.

"I won't tell anyone this happened. That you were partially disrobed, I mean." He swallowed, gaze intensely pinned to the beginnings of the bruise on her arm and shoulder.

"No one would think of you as taking advantage of an innocent woman." She licked her dry lips and let her eyes drift close as he rubbed.

"I'm sorry you were hurt."

"It wasn't your fault. No one is to blame. Jenny is not the safest horse on this estate. I hope the lord sells her. It would be far worse if Bethany was injured because of Jenny."

"It's Galen's fault for not tying her better. I won't have an

incompetent fool like him around these horses. He knows how to tie a suitable knot. One that won't slip and cause someone to be injured. He was careless. It's the last time." Fletcher removed his hand. "I'll get you some tea. Then we'll get you back to the manor."

She couldn't argue his reasoning for wanting to fire Galen. Carelessness had no place around horses. Though she should have searched for Bethany elsewhere rather than approach Jenny. "I'm partly to blame too."

A governess had no place around horses. She leaned her head back on the sofa. Worn from her fright and the pain, she closed her eyes.

Chapter 8

Rapid pounding pulled Fletcher from sleep. He bolted upright and threw his legs over the side of his bed before he came fully awake.

He threw a shirt over his head, then tugged on his denim trousers as he descended the stairs. "Be there in a minute. Coming!"

When he entered the hall, he caught a glimpse of Jayne sitting on the sofa, blanket around her hips, still in her chemise, and her face scrunched in bewilderment. He froze and their gazes met.

"Put your blouse on." He waved his hands at her. She'd fallen asleep on the sofa and he didn't have the heart to wake her. Last night he'd draped a blanket across her and let her rest. For the first time since Jenny had run into her, she'd seemed peaceful and at ease.

"Nash! Open this door."

His blood ran cold.

Jayne struggled to get into her blouse. Still half tucked into her skirt, she had to straighten out the sleeves. The thing was hopelessly wrinkled.

The door burst inward.

George Camprich strode through with all the authority of a man who owned the cottage. He only loaned it to Fletcher as part of their agreement for Fletcher to train the horses. "What the devil was keeping you? I've been at the door a good fifteen minutes. You look as though you've recently tumbled from bed. Not drinking again, are you?"

He tried to flatten his hair with his hand. "No, Lord Camprich. Did you just arrive?"

Camprich's jaw tightened. "Not half an hour ago. I already have an emergency."

Fletcher hurried forward before Camprich could peek into the parlor. "What is it?"

"My daughter is beside herself with worry for her governess. It seems Miss Strange had an accident at the stables yesterday and has not been seen since the evening. She promised to return to the house,

but never arrived. I need everyone available to look for her. Bethany won't be calmed by anything less."

Tall, athletic, and with all the bearing of a man who knew his station in life, Camprich didn't ask. He demanded with an edge in his voice.

"I know all about it. I didn't see the accident, but I assessed Miss Strange's condition. She insisted she wasn't injured badly and I believed her. I brought her here because it was closer than the house. Then I went out again and discovered Jenny had gone straight to her paddock with the other mares. She wasn't hurt. Galen and I spoke about the incident. He's leaving this morning. There are too many problems with him to allow him to continue on here."

"Did you escort Miss Strange back to the house?" Camprich put his hands on his hips. "No one in the house has seen any indication that she returned."

No one received any indication you were returning this morning. Fletcher bit his tongue, then shook his head. "I didn't take her back to the house."

She popped out of the parlor, high color on her cheeks. She moved a bit stiffly, as though her shoulder still pained her. An imprint of the sofa weave marred her face. She looked like she'd just tumbled from his bed.

Fletcher's heart skipped a beat.

"Lord Camprich. I am terribly sorry to have caused such a panic. I would not have alarmed your daughter. Unfortunately, when Mr. Nash brought me here last night, I fell asleep on his sofa. It was a complete accident." She turned her grey gaze on Fletcher. "It seems rather than disturb me, Mr. Nash was good enough to sleep out of doors last night, leaving me completely alone in the cottage. He just returned to freshen up before his morning duties and remind me that I too should get on my way."

Camprich narrowed his eyes—a steely blue—at Jayne. "You slept here?"

She lowered her gaze. "I did. Quite alone."

Camprich's gaze wandered over her. She was in more disarray than she had been when Jenny knocked her down. Nothing about Jayne's appearance said she'd been alone.

Nor did Fletcher's. His braces hung at his sides. His shirt remained untucked. He wore no boots and his hair was mussed. "She's telling the truth. I slept in the barn."

The baron's jaw tightened. "I was informed that the two of you spend a great deal of time together. I won't have the woman who's meant to influence my daughter in positive ways leading her down a path of degradation."

Fletcher stepped in front of Jayne to shield her from Camprich's hard stare. "We're friends, brought together by Bethany's love of horses. Nothing is going on between us."

"That isn't what Galen and Samuel told me when I talked to them. Both claimed to see you kissing Miss Strange yesterday in the paddock."

"Samuel is only trying to keep Galen from losing his job." Fletcher curled his fists. "Miss Strange is innocent here. She could have been seriously injured because Galen failed to tie Jenny properly."

"The evidence presents itself, Mr. Nash. I have a fondness for you, for what you've done here, and because of your impressive skills in Buffalo Bill's show. However, with the accusation and what I see before me, I've drawn the conclusion that Miss Strange is not the sort of woman I wish to be in charge of Bethany's education. You may gather your belongings, Miss Strange. Your employment is terminated."

Jayne covered her mouth with her hand. Tears welled in her eyes. "Nothing happened, Lord."

"Nothing other than an unmarried woman in my employ spent the night in a man's house. You were given your own room, Miss Strange. It should have been perfectly suitable to recover from this alleged injury you received. I will draw up your pay while you pack. There will be no letter of recommendation for you." Camprich turned, then left the cottage.

A sob broke from Jayne's mouth. She hung her head as the tears ran freely down her face.

"Jayne..." He couldn't think of any way to comfort her.

She wiped her eyes. "You have to watch after her, Fletcher. Keep her safe. They may be her parents, they may love her, but she needs you."

He gritted his teeth. "No, this is ridiculous. I'm going up to the house to talk to him again. If he won't allow you to stay, then I'm going to quit. This isn't fair to you."

Jayne shook her head. Her hair had fallen loose and hung down her shoulders. "No, please don't. It isn't right that two of us should be out of a job. You need this place. It's good for you. I can find another position. Even without a letter from the Campriches. I have to pack."

Her calm acceptance infuriated him. "I'm going to flog Galen within an inch of his life. This is wrong."

"Please, please listen. Be rational." She closed the distance between them. Lifted her right hand and cupped his face with it. "You know Lord Camprich is right. We were caught doing the very thing we knew we shouldn't. I wouldn't trade my time here for anything. You...you made me feel special. Made me feel as though someone will be able to

love me someday. I might be more than just an authority figure to someone else's children."

Fletcher's heart cracked. "Me, Jayne. It could be me. That could be our dream."

She laughed, a brittle sound that matched the sadness in her eyes. "Where? Here? I'll move into the cottage and be your mistress?"

"He would never stand for that. We'd marry. Doesn't that make the most sense?" Confused by her refusal to see the answer, he stepped back. "Marry me."

"No. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not the week after next." Her face closed and her eyes hardened. "That is not the solution for either of us."

"But why not?"

"You're still in love with your Rosalyn. Still in love with that beautiful little girl the two of you created. There's no room for me in there."

Anger burned through him. "That's not true."

"You are my friend and you always shall be. I admire your dedication to Roslyn. I wish I could have met her. Thank you for taking care of me last evening. I had better go before Lord Camprich sends someone after me." She left.

Fletcher clenched his eyes shut and his hands into balls when the door closed behind her.

He'd lost his second chance for happiness because one nosy lord couldn't keep out of another man's business. And because Jayne couldn't see he was finally ready to let go of his past.



To suit Jayne's mood, the clouds had let loose in an all-day shower. She'd gotten wet riding to town in the dog cart with Samuel driving. He had little to say to her, clearly pleased that his friend had gotten to keep his job at the stables and that Lord Camprich was tossing her out.

She didn't have much to say to him either, so she rode in silence and said nothing when he removed her trunks from the cart. All she could do was wait for a train that would carry her back to London. She might find work there as a governess if the new employers weren't too inquisitive about her previous position. If not, she could apply at any number of shops. Although her plain features weren't

much help in selling fine fashions. Or perhaps she could find work as a secretary. Her handwriting was impeccable. There were plenty of jobs she could do in London. All she had to do was get there.

Far away from Fletcher. She closed her eyes. She'd never see his charming smile again. Never watch his confident swagger as he groomed Oro. Never feel his soft lips against hers. She *had* to leave him. Staying with him in a place where she wasn't wanted would never work. Lord Camprich had made it quite clear she wasn't welcome. Everyone on the estate would think something inappropriate had gone on between them, even if she'd accepted his offer of marriage. It had been a noble gesture on his part. She couldn't tie him down that way.

She already missed Bethany, who hadn't even been allowed to say goodbye to her. Tears threatened, but she held them back. There was enough moisture in the air without her adding to it.

Packing hadn't done any favors to help her shoulder. One of the lower servants had assisted her, but the dratted thing still felt as though it might fall off at the joint any moment. The coolness of the air didn't help. She wanted to nestle into her warm bed at Camprich Manor with a novel and forget her woes.

"I don't even have a bed to call my own anymore."

What use was dwelling on it? When she arrived in London, she'd find a rooming house. Something nice. Not one of those dreadful houses in the working class district. She'd never ventured down there, and with luck, would never have to. Her days of living in an orphan home in a sad district were over. Surely she could find some decent work.

Though the roof over the platform kept her from getting soaked, water splashed down on her shoes and hem. She would be a soggy mess by the time the train arrived. The journey back to London would be miserable—though her spirits were already so low, they couldn't sink much further.

She hugged her shawl closer. The train wouldn't arrive until late afternoon. She had several hours to wait. A cup of tea might help lift her mood. All she had to do was tromp through the mud to the tea house down the road. Leaving her luggage unguarded, sadly. Though it didn't seem that too many people were out and about in this weather.

Jayne opened her umbrella, then stepped out into the rain. Droplets hit the oiled silk with disheartening thumps. She crossed the street, splashing through puddles. It would take some washer woman a great deal of effort to remove the mud. If she should even waste money on sending her laundry out. If she scrubbed it for herself, it would save several coins. Soon, she'd be forced to make her own tea.

No more servants to fetch it for her. She'd become accustomed to being waited on. Now life required her to fend for herself.

"I will not cry. I will not cry. That is unacceptable." Standing outside the tea house, tears began leaking down her cheeks. Even a warm cuppa wasn't going to solve any of her problems.

"Miss Strange. You seem to have found yourself in some sort of predicament. I can't say I've ever run into a crying lady outside a tea house."

She spun and lowered her umbrella at Fletcher's voice.

Water dripped off his cowboy hat onto his oiled dust coat. His brow furrowed as he looked down at her.

"What are you doing here?" She wiped at her face. "You're supposed to be at Camprich Manor."

He shrugged. "I quit."

"What? Why? We agreed you would look after Bethany. She'll be devastated that we're both gone. You have to return and ask Lord Camprich for your job back." She hiccupped. "Of all the foolish things for you to do!"

"He treated you unfairly." Fletcher swung his leg over Oro's back. He held onto the reins, but approached her. "I told him so to his face. Told him that if he didn't give you another chance, he could find someone else to train his horses."

She withdrew her handkerchief from her handbag. "Oh, Fletcher. That was ridiculous and unnecessary."

"I don't want to stay at Camprich Manor without you. Not for all the money in his bank."

"You foolish man. What were you thinking?"

"That I love you. That I've wanted to say so since I gave you that locket. I'm not the sort of man a woman like you ought to marry. You should have been good enough to wear the ring of any of those men who escorted your friend around London. But they didn't see what I saw. How big your heart is. How much you care about others. You know I loved Rosalyn. Loved that baby I only got to hold for a few hours before I had to bury her. I love you like that too, Jayne. In my eyes, you're not plain. You're never boring. You're beautiful and special. How do I convince you of that?"

Tears streamed down her cheeks again. "That's—that's... Beautiful."

He spread his arms. "So here I am with nothing but my horse and my heart, ready to follow you to London or France or wherever it is you're taking those heavy trunks full of grey and lavender gowns. Me and Oro, we'll go anywhere as long as we get to go with you."

She dabbed her eyes. "I've recently gained an interest in visiting Texas."

“Texas?” He patted Oro’s neck. “Seems like we might know a thing or two about that place. But there’s something we have to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Get a ring on your finger. You think my family is going to be thrilled to learn I traveled all the way from England with an unmarried woman? It could ruin my reputation. If you’re not too stubborn to accept a proposal this time.”

Jayne laughed. “I regretted it. Regretted leaving you, but I was afraid of causing you to lose your job. Since you’ve quit, what will we do?”

“Open a livery? Maybe raise horses of our own. We’ll figure it out on the trip to the States.” He reached into his pocket. “I have this for you from Bethany. She was upset when I told her you left and that I had to go too, but she understood.”

She took the folded note and opened it.

Dear Miss Jayne,

I will miss you and Mr. Nash. I wish you did not have to go. Mr. Nash told me that he loves you. That is why he cannot stay with us. I learned a lot from him and from you. It was the best time. Please write to me wherever you go. Please marry Mr. Nash because he will not be happy unless you are together. Take care of Oro and give him a kiss from me.

Love,

Miss Bethany Camprich

“She’s such a sensitive, caring child. Did she truly write this?” Jayne folded it and put it into her handbag.

“She made me wait while she did. I wasn’t allowed to leave without taking it. She didn’t get to say goodbye, so she needed some closure.”

“I’m going to miss her a great deal. I’ll write to her. If her parents are gone as often as everyone says, they’ll never know. I’m sure Mrs. Lusk will see that she gets the letters.”

“We’ll both write. She’ll be excited to learn we settled on going to Texas. When she’s of age, we’ll invite her to visit.”

“I’d like that.” She smiled at Fletcher. “I’m glad that we were able to bring some joy to her life. I hope I can do the same for you. Now that there are no constraints, I can say, I love you, Fletcher. I can say it as often as I like whenever I like.”

“I will never get tired of hearing it.” He looked up at the sky. “It stopped raining.”

“Does it matter? We’re already soaking wet.”

“Nevertheless, the day is looking up. How many hours till that train arrives?”

“A few more. Why?”

His familiar grin flashed beneath his cowboy hat. “I reckon I’ve got

a ring to buy. Care to join me? Oro will stand guard over your luggage. He'll bite anyone who tries to take it."

She laughed. "Our own personal guard horse. How convenient. And, yes, I'd love to join you while you purchase a ring I never intend to remove. This is just like a penny dreadful where the hero rides off into the sunset after capturing the heroine's heart."

"Happily-ever-after?"

"That's for fairy tales. This was a rollicking adventure and my cowboy is far more exciting than any prince."

"I'm just a plain man in love with a kind, smart woman." He leaned close and cupped her face. "I don't need grand adventures or fairy tale romance. Only your love, for always."

"You shall have it. In plain sight, for everyone to see. For always."

About the Author

A love of reading inspired award-winning and international best-selling author Allison Merritt to pursue her dream of becoming a writer who explores historical, paranormal, contemporary, and fantasy romances, often combining the sub-genres. She lives in a small town in the Ozark Mountains with her husband and dogs. It's not unusual to find her lurking in graveyards, wandering historical sites, or listening to ghost stories.

Allison graduated from College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Missouri with a B.A. in mass communications that's gathering dust after it was determined that she's better at writing fluff than hard news.

Other books by Allison Merritt

The Treasure Hunter's Lady (The Guardian Chronicles)

The Sky Pirate's Wife (The Guardian Chronicles)

The Turncoat's Temptress (The Guardian Chronicles)

The Convict and the Cattleman

The Wrong Brother's Bride

Wildwood Spring

Reclaiming Her Heart

Hell and A Hard Place (The Heckmasters)

Hell and Back (The Heckmasters)

Hell and Gone (The Heckmasters)

Her Heart's Surrender

Her Heart's Desire

Lawless

The Lady's Chocolatier

Sandra Sookoo

Chapter 1

London, England

Late April, 1888

Dash it all!

Mr. Jasper Winslow briefly closed his eyes, but upon opening them once more, the view didn't change, and it wasn't a trick of his vision due to the pouring rain. He pulled up the collar of his overcoat to protect the back of his neck. It didn't prevent water from dripping off the brim of his bowler hat and onto the tip of his nose. What was *she* doing here, in London's Victoria Station, waiting on the very platform upon which he stood? The longer he stared, the hotter irritation swelled within his being.

Good Gad, he hadn't given thought to Miss Evangeline Bradenwilde for five years.

And for good reason. She'd given him the mitten, which is to say declined to marry him. A man didn't often reflect on the woman who'd fled from him just when he'd been about to propose, and in the garden of his father's country estate, no less—with all of his family waiting inside for the expected announcement. Handed him some rubbish about wanting her freedom, regardless of the fact he'd given her everything a woman could want during their two-year courtship. As the second son of the Viscount Hedgebourne, he was afforded certain privileges. She would have wanted for nothing. Apparently, she took exception to all of it. After that, he'd spent the bulk of his time keeping busy and learning how to craft French chocolates so he wouldn't have to think about her.

Nevertheless, here she now was, thrown into his path by fate or chance. What to do about it?

Nothing. I will do nothing, for she doesn't deserve my regard.

Words from his mother rang in his head, uttered some few months

after Evangeline had run. *Stop moping about that woman. She is not worthy of you or this family, no matter her pedigree. Obviously, she is not right in her mental faculties.*

Jasper shook his head. The failed relationship belonged in the past, and that's where he would keep it. Still, he renewed the grip on the handle of his valise with one hand while he unfurled his plain black umbrella and contemplated this ripple in his previously smooth life. Since she was some way down the platform from his current location, he took refuge behind a stone support column as the train he'd stepped from pulled away in a puff of steam and squeal of steel against steel. At least this way he could spy without being seen.

While lingering passengers, some with open umbrellas, some with hooded capes, made their way down the platform, he observed the woman he'd deeply cared about years ago. Her back was to him as she sat, prim and proper, spine ramrod straight, upon a battered, brown leather traveling trunk, a black umbrella doing a poor job of protecting her from the foul weather. At her feet rested a modest carpetbag that, the longer she sat in the rain, the wetter it became. Every so often she would heave a sigh, dig a gloved hand beneath her smart green velvet jacket and withdraw a timepiece attached to a gold chain. Then she would check the time, sigh again and return the bauble under her clothing.

What the devil was she doing out here, in the dark and rain, without a companion or escort and no one to meet her?

I don't wish to know. He ducked around the pillar, preparing to go on his way and once more forget about her. His conscience got the better of him, and despite his silent vow, he turned back around and contemplated her once more. His breath fogged white in the declining temperatures. Spring rain aside, it felt more like late winter. Bloody fickle English weather.

Jasper again adjusted his grip on his valise handle. Her upswept strawberry-blonde hair, beneath the brim of a wide straw hat decorated with green ribbons and flowers, caught the light from a nearby lamp and gleamed a rich gold. His chest tightened in remembrance of the sweet honeysuckle scent her hair had possessed back then, at how silken those strands were on the few times he'd plucked the pins from the masses when he'd forgotten himself and all decorum, at how her eyelids would flutter closed when he lowered his lips to hers in a kiss, and always a chaste kiss at that, for there were rules of proper courtship, after all.

Get hold of yourself, man. She means nothing to you now.

His eyes narrowed as he stared. Though he was no longer bitter about her defection, neither could he forget the pain she'd caused. Still, he was raised a gentleman, and that meant he couldn't leave her

in the rain, alone.

Yet did he really want to open that previously locked door to his past? Especially when, if he gave her an inch, all of those feelings he'd thought tucked away might come tumbling back to mock him?

Wracked with indecision, he made his way over to the departing station master, who wore his cap low on his forehead, his shoulders hunched against the precipitation. "Excuse me, my good man," he called to him. "Can you tell me how long that young woman has been sitting here in the rain?" He gestured with a thumb toward Evangeline's position.

The man looked around Jasper's shoulder. "About an hour. Too bad, that. We ain't exactly having the Queen's weather, huh?" A shiver wracked the man's thin frame. The rain, coupled with the cold, left a body frozen down to the bone.

"No, we aren't." Popular gossip said that each time the queen appeared in public, she always had fair and sunny weather. No doubt she was in her private chambers this night.

A tight smile stretched the man's face. "She asked about a train to Brighton." He shrugged. Water beaded on the navy wool of his uniform. "No more trains to anywhere tonight what with the storm building. Expected to batter most of England for a few days, they say. Deuced bad luck, that."

Indubitably. "She has no one to meet her?"

"Evidently not. Wanted to go on to Brighton, but everyone had to disembark here due to the rain and the rotten state of the tracks." His mutton chop mustache drooped. "Refused my offer to let her sit inside the station. Now I've locked up and she's wet." He shook his head. "I'll never understand the womenfolk."

If that wasn't God's honest truth, Jasper didn't know what was. "Yes, well, I'm certain she had her reasons." Stubborn, most likely. Proud, definitely. At least he remembered that about her. Wouldn't make a spontaneous decision about anything. She liked to weigh all options and ended up overthinking until she'd talked herself out of something.

"Lord preserve us from strong-willed women, right, mate?" The other man rolled his eyes. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm off to get my supper. My rain-napper broke this morning, so I need to hurry. The damp's not good for the health."

"Of course," Jasper murmured. He stepped aside for the man to pass. "One more thing. Has she not made arrangements for a hack or cab?" One of the men working on or around the platform would have rendered assistance in securing such a vehicle.

"Not that I'm aware. Said she was robbed shortly before she disembarked. Has no way to hire a carriage. The unknown person

took her purse, and she couldn't identify anyone while on the platform. The boys and I could give her no recourse."

But they could have extended a kindness, free of charge. "Ah. I see." Jasper frowned. Why did she not call upon her family in London? "Thank you. Enjoy your evening."

The station master briefly lifted his cap. "You do the same, sir. Perhaps the wife will have a nice stew or broth on the boil."

Indeed, that did sound delightful, and his stomach grumbled in agreement. He hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning. And now his attention kept drawing back to the woman on the trunk. *Damn and blast.* He wheeled about and once more gazed upon the sad figure she made as she shifted her stance. She was in some misery. Water dripped from her hat's brim despite the umbrella. The hem of her sage green gown was wet six inches up the fabric. An hour she'd sat there, bearing erect and not speaking to anyone, as was her wont. She didn't acknowledge the station master as he rushed past her. No doubt she considered herself quite capable of taking care of herself and wouldn't lower herself to ask for help when she truly needed it. Had she always been so proud?

He snorted. Of course she had. What had she done with her life in the five years since they'd been apart? Another swath of hot irritation cut through him. This time at himself. *I don't wish to know.* He didn't want to be the man who was rendered weak at the sight of the woman who'd yanked out his heart and smashed it beneath her heel, didn't wish to play hero to her damsel in distress. Yet... He cursed under his breath. Manners were too far ingrained into him to walk by and leave her to fate. And he generally didn't wish her ill. If she had found happiness away from him, good for her.

I'm a bacon-brained idiot.

Perhaps he would offer to share his carriage, at least let her find shelter from the weather, but that was all. As a nod to the two years they'd shared in the past.

With trepidation dogging his steps, Jasper slowly traversed the platform. Soon it would empty of passengers and porters. Already the anemic crowds were thinning, hastened due to the weather and the late hour. Not once did she turn to see who approached. The closer he came to her location, the more his stomach muscles tightened. Then he stood at her shoulder, waiting, hoping she would acknowledge his presence so he wouldn't have to introduce conversation.

She continued to ignore him.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "Horrible weather we're having. Quite the detriment to enjoying oneself." Could he appear any more of a rube than he did now? Who the deuce talked about the weather while one was experiencing it?

The woman still didn't acknowledge him. However, she did reply, "Life cannot always be beer and skittles every moment." Her tone was clipped and the chill in it could turn the rain to snow if she continued speaking.

Jasper's jaw dropped. Of course life wasn't a perpetual good time, but it went better for a person when they were looking on the bright side. Had she really just used slang? Despite their history, intrigue pushed through his reserves. "I beg your pardon—"

"If you think to part me from my valuables, take yourself off, sir. I have already been robbed once this night." Her stare remained focused ahead of her.

Damn woman. "Miss Bradenwilde, perhaps you could enlighten me." Her slight gasp rang over the sound of the rain. Would his use of her name finally bring her around? "Why do you persist in sitting in the dark and the rain, and from your own admission, without resources?"

She tilted her umbrella and glanced over her shoulder. When she lifted her chin and swept her gaze over his person to alight on his face, her remarkable blue-green eyes widened. Her full lips slightly parted as surprise lined her round face. "Go toast your blooming eyebrows, Mr. Winslow. I have nothing to say to you."

If he was shocked at her first response, her second left him gawking like a boy at his first circus. She'd basically told him off in gutter speech he had no idea she'd known. Where the hell had she learned such vulgarity, and why did his pulse kick up along with his curiosity?

What the devil else had she been educated in while they'd been apart?

Then righteous indignation set in. His chest tightened with annoyance. Who was she to send him away when he was the injured party in their tiff? In a fit of pique, he tipped his umbrella so any accumulated water dumped upon her and dripped onto her shoulder. And he didn't apologize. "*You* have nothing to say to *me*?" The incredulity in his tone rose above the rain drumming on the umbrellas and the platform itself. "In the event that you've suddenly forgotten what transpired between us, you ran out on me. You embarrassed me in front of my whole family." His breath produced white puffs into the chilly air. "From my estimation, you do not have the luxury of ordering me anywhere." God, it felt good to get that off his chest.

"You would bring that up at a time like this." It wasn't a question. Evangeline stood. She leaned slightly down, grabbed the handle of her carpetbag and then deposited it atop the trunk with a wet *plop*!

"I would, especially since I wasn't given a choice."

"It is not up for debate." She glared and her eyes spit exasperation

tinged with despair. "What I am doing here is none of your business." The woman made a great show of glancing about the now-deserted platform—deserted except for one sleek black carriage that drew to a halt nearby. "I assume that's your vehicle." She gestured with her chin.

"Yes." Why did her assumption make him want to defend himself? It wasn't his fault he'd had the foresight to telephone his shop assistant once he'd reached English soil and had instructed him to send a carriage, after giving over his train arrival time. "I'm anxious to return home." Being in France for the past two weeks had been inspiring, but there was no place like jolly old England.

"By all means, do not let me keep you." She stood back and snapped her wet skirting away from him, as if he might brush by her should he pass. "No doubt you have important work to resume or people high on the instep to meet."

An eyebrow soared upward while he flicked his gaze quickly over her person. Heat stabbed through him. She'd always possessed a voluptuous figure. Now, that figure had only been enhanced, featuring curves in all the right places. Curves that would drive a man insane for a peek at bosom or hip. The tight confines of the green velvet displayed her charms to full advantage, the frothy lace at her throat drew his attention there. He sent his gaze over her left shoulder. "I do, but that is not the point." Jasper cleared his throat. "Do you, ah, have appropriate travel arrangements?"

"Perhaps." She looked to the side, the brim of her hat hiding her face.

Walk away, Jasper. Leave her haughty arse on the platform and make certain she remains in your past.

The problem with having a conscience is that it was nearly impossible to ignore it because, if one tried, the blasted thing would keep on talking until one's head was full of suggestions and advice—and ill-advised hope. He sighed. "If it wouldn't trouble you too much, perhaps you should share my carriage. I shall be happy to take you anywhere in London you need to go."

"I am quite fine here, thank you." She still wouldn't look at him. Was that a faint blush staining her pale cheeks? Hard to tell in the gloom.

Interesting. Was she angry or embarrassed—or was a different emotion at play to put such color into her cheeks? And why did he want to know? He shoved the thoughts away. "You never were a tolerable liar, Evangeline," he said softly, taking leave to use her given name. "Come. Share my carriage and get out of the rain. Even pride must fall before horrid English weather."

For long seconds she stood, avoiding his gaze, the cold

precipitation further soaking her garments. Eventually, she nodded, and it was a curt affair, but she swiveled around so that she peered directly at him from beneath the brim of her hat, her emotions unreadable. "A break from the rain would be welcome."

"Excellent."

"Yes, quite."

This is ridiculous. "Let's crack on then. I'm not inclined to remain in the damp either." He looked at her luggage. "There's nothing for it but to heft the trunk into the carriage. It can rest upon one of the benches." Had he known he would need to accommodate a lady's excessive baggage, he would have impressed upon his assistant to have a different vehicle brought around.

"Do be careful. The contents are of some value." She took possession of her carpetbag, folded her umbrella and then followed him toward the carriage.

"I'll do my best." As they drew even, the driver opened the door and handed Evangeline inside. "If you would help me haul that trunk over, I'd appreciate it." He tossed his valise onto the floor of the carriage.

The other man glanced between the abandoned trunk to the woman in the carriage and back to the luggage, speculation in his gaze. Jasper hated that look, hated the thoughts no doubt running through the driver's mind. "We'll have it loaded in two shakes." Gus—the driver—ran through the rain while Jasper folded his umbrella and went to assist the man with the trunk. Nothing else was said—or implied—regarding the rescue of lady or luggage.

Once they perched it onto one of the benches, the red velvet squabs crushed beneath its weight, Jasper nodded his thanks. "To Bond Street, my good man. The Emporium to be precise." It was said out of rote. He'd forgotten the presence of his feminine cargo. Heat crept up the back of his neck. "I mean..."

The driver nodded then hunched into the rain. "Very good." He cleared his throat and again slid a glance inside the carriage. Evangeline had turned her face away from the window. In fact, she'd scampered to the far side of the conveyance. "I understand your address, but will there be a stop between for the lady?"

"I'm not certain. Once I procure the information, I will let you know."

"Right. We'll be there soon." As Gus swung himself into his seat, Jasper climbed into the carriage. As soon as he slammed the door closed, the vehicle lurched into motion. He peered at his companion through the dim interior. "Do you have a direction?"

"No." The thick silence around them swallowed the one-word answer. "For all intents and purposes, I am alone for the moment."

Jasper stared as water dripped from the brim of his hat. Well, that did put him in a pickle. The second the trace of a tear made its way down the pale slope of her cheek, illuminated in the light from a lamp they passed, his decision was made. "Bond Street it is then."

Hellfire and botheration. What am I supposed to do with her now?

Chapter 2

Dear heavens, I've acted the shrew.

Again.

That wasn't her intention. Miss Evangeline Bradenwilde stared straight ahead as she sat with shoulders stiff and back straight. The carriage clattered over the cobblestone streets of London, headed to God only knew where, and here she was, nearly brushing arms with the one person she hoped she'd never see again, Mr. Jasper Winslow—the man she'd bolted from that long ago day when he'd gone down on one knee and brought forth a ring.

That dratted diamond solitaire surrounded by small amethysts that formed a flower, all set in elegant silver filigree, the blasted sentimentality of it, for he'd always brought her posies of violets when they were in bloom, saying when she wore them or anything purple, her eyes were more blue than green. The ring had sent panic down her spine and fear into her heart, prompting flight.

All in a bid for independence. Seeing him again when she'd been at her lowest had brought out the prickles.

The burn of embarrassment and annoyance simmered within her chest, warming her through and making her temporarily forget the chilly dampness of her clothing as well as the panic from having her purse stolen on the train. When she'd made the decision to leave Jasper to his future while she chased hers, it had been the best for them both. She'd wanted her freedom, wanted to spread her wings without depending on her family's money or connections within the *ton*, wanted to have success linked to her name that included more than an advantageous marriage, creating the perfect family or keeping an efficient house.

Yet what did she have to show for their five years apart? Working in an underpinnings shop owned by her aunt with anemic sales and no personal relationship to speak of or inroads made into starting a family—perfect or otherwise. She was twenty-nine years old. Way past an age where a man of discerning taste would take her to wife, long past the time where bearing children was ideal. The thoughts sent a

pang of longing through her insides. It wasn't that she regretted the choices she'd made—she didn't—for she'd gained experience and had traveled all over England. Yet... Here she was, with the very man she'd wished to make a lasting impression on, convince him that her refusal had been a wise decision, but there was no story, no accolades, no fat bank account and no gloating to back up why she'd made her choice to leave him.

I have failed on every front. Nothing in my life has worked as I'd hoped.

The muscles in her stomach clenched and cold panic slid through her chest. Perhaps it was true, and no matter that the world had advanced in technology and forward thinking, a woman still couldn't attain success without the backing of a man. She shook her head. No, she didn't accept that. And neither was what she felt at all in conjunction to the man beside her. This sense of unease and even discontent stemmed from disappointment at missing her grandmother's seventy-third birthday celebration in Brighton on the morrow.

Nothing more. It didn't matter a jot what Jasper Winslow thought or even what his life was like now.

Much.

Botheration. Liar. Of course she'd thought about Jasper during their time apart, and his opinions still mattered. Did he hold her defection against her? She blew out a breath. *It is simply a case of trying harder.* She vowed she would make more of an effort to make her mark upon the world before she passed another year of life. After everything, she had her pride, and that had kept her in forward momentum these last years more than anything else. Jasper and his opinions could go hang. *I am worth more than being some man's arm ornament and a means to further a man's name and legacy.*

"Drat."

"Did you want to utter something profound?" His tone was clipped, cold.

"No." Despite the fact she didn't wish to talk to her companion, Evangeline cast a glance at him. If luck was with her, she'd convince him to drop her somewhere—anywhere—within the city, and he would never know her dreams hadn't matured into the grand career and indulgent independence she'd left him to pursue. He'd never know of her failure; he'd never know part of her regretted that rash decision she'd tossed away without care or thought.

And he especially would never know that she wondered, every now and again, what her life would have been like had she married him.

"Are you content enough to stare without words? Which is quite

rude, I might add.” One of his eyebrows arched as he turned his face toward her. “I could preen and posture like a peacock if that would help your perusal.”

The heat of humiliation shot into her cheeks, and caught peeking, she couldn’t very well glance away. Instead, she forced a hard swallow and boldly met his gaze, and then gasped at the sharp annoyance in those steely gray depths. “I... ah... apologize for staring.” His aquiline nose sat beneath striking, dark brown eyebrows and gave his noble face character and a hint of arrogance she remembered so well. When a faint grin curved his sensuous lips, a tremor moved through her belly, and this time she fixed her gaze to the knot of his gray-and-black striped cravat. *Why can I not banish my reaction to him entirely?*

“Yes, one can readily discern that.”

For one terrible second, she thought she could read her mind and she gawked at him.

He softly cleared his throat and the grin had vanished, which brought her attention back to his face. His eyes flashed in the gloomy carriage interior, eyes that were undeniably stormy as wind-tossed waves. “The question that remains is: why?”

“Why am I apologizing?” She frowned, not following his logic.

“No, why are you staring to begin with? If I remember correctly, on the platform, you were adamant that you didn’t have anything to say to me.” He rested an ankle on a knee. Droplets of water rolled off his overcoat and gray-and-black striped trousers.

“I was out of sorts then.” Of course he would choose to remember *that*. “I merely wished to see how time had treated you.” That wasn’t necessarily a lie.

“I would like to hope it’s been as kind as it has to you.”

“Oh.” Heat of a different kind flooded her face. “Thank you for the compliment.” Once more her gaze dropped to his cravat. “You look as handsome as you did the last time I saw you.” Another truth. The man had no right to be as dashing as he was. Why could not the years have given him a paunch and thinning hair? A wart even?

“Ah, that last time when you fled the garden as if the hounds of hell were at your heels.” A trace of humor rang in his voice, which contradicted the annoyance she’d spied in his eyes. “Thank the heavens my looks weren’t the reason for your flight.”

“Yes, well, that is in the past.” She stifled the urge to snort with laughter as she threaded her fingers together in her lap. The thin kid did nothing to keep the chill at bay.

“We would like to hope.” The tone of his voice suggested it might not be, and another trace of tremors moved down her spine. “Where shall I drop you? Do you have a direction? From what I remember, I’m certain you have family in London.”

"I do, but most of them are in Brighton at the moment, and I do not relish showing up on one of their doorsteps, wet, bedraggled and in need of assistance due to the fact my purse was stolen on the train, leaving me without pin money." She turned her face to the window and the black velvet curtain that covered it.

"Are you unharmed from that incident?" Though the inquiry was polite, concern hung on the words.

She appreciated the sentiment. Being independent was well and good, but one sorely missed having someone else about as companion. "I am fine. More angry than anything else. I should have paid more attention to my surroundings, but with the crush of people and the rain, I was distracted."

"Ah."

"London is filled with criminals." There was no excuse for her babble, yet she indulged in it anyway.

"Yes, but it also has good people too. You must look harder."

What the devil did that mean? Now she had nowhere to go unless she wished to throw herself on the mercy of her family, the very people from whom she'd refused help too many times for any of them to offer it now. The thing about independence meant one walked that road alone by necessity. Add to that fact, if she went back on her word, then she'd be giving permission for her mother or even her grandmother to resume matchmaking attempts.

And she'd land in the same drink she'd run from five years ago.

"If I might venture a guess to explain your current contretemps?"

"I cannot stop you."

That dratted eyebrow lifted once more. He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Because you more than likely ran from your family when you ran from me, it is now a matter of pride that you won't ask for assistance—from any of us."

How could he deduct that? Her jaw dropped and she solidly met his knowing gaze. "I..." She wetted her lips, unsure of how to continue. The best course of action would be not to allow this line of questioning at all. The last thing she wanted was his censure. "It is also none of your business, Mr. Winslow."

"That is no longer a sufficient answer, Miss Bradenwilde." Part of Evangeline died that he hadn't repeated her Christian name as he'd done on the platform. When he turned toward her and planted both feet on the boards of the carriage, his knee knocked into hers. Tingles played the base of her spine. Heat spread from the point of contact. "Why are you in London?"

"I couldn't transfer to Brighton due to weather." That was a vague enough answer, and something he could easily discover for himself. "And some business about trees and debris being over the tracks from

the storm. The station master said the trains wouldn't run in the storm until it was deemed safe for travel again."

"What is in Brighton that all of your family members are already there and you are not?" He searched her face with his intense gaze. "When I knew you, your family haunted London and never missed a *ton* function."

Oh, the irony of that. Her family moved in circles she didn't want to trod, yet here she was, back in the capital, sharing a carriage with the second son of a viscount and the reason for her flight to Brighton to begin with. It was as if those last five years had never happened. "If you must know, my grandmother is celebrating a birthday, and since she prefers the climate and entertainment of Brighton, that's where she has taken up residence. She demanded the family attend her there." That pulled a smile from her, for Lady Jane had a stubborn streak that grew more pronounced as the years went by. "Also, my aunt lives with her, and we, ah..." She waved a hand. "Nevermind. It is not important."

Jasper nodded. "From what I remember of your adventurous grandmother, she let nothing dissuade her from doing exactly as she pleased."

"Yes." Fond memories warmed her insides and chased away a bit of the cold. "She was the one who encouraged me to spread me wings, to walk my own path, regardless of gossip." It was more than she'd wanted to reveal to him, but she couldn't recall the words now. With a sigh, she regarded the window again. "She is every bit the earl's daughter. The stories she tells of the exciting places she'd gone as a child with her parents, as well as the madcap scrapes, the romantic interludes she'd indulged in later, the schemes she'd gotten into even after her marriage..." Evangeline shook her head. "I wish I was more like her than the woman I have become."

"Why can you not be that woman? It's not as if you are at the end of your life." A frown rang in his voice.

"It's... complicated. I do not wish to speak of it." For like their relationship, the time to chase a new dream was in the past, especially when the current one she lived wasn't working.

"Nothing is ever complicated. It is our musing upon the thing that makes it so." He captured her gaze and lowered his voice. The almost gentle tones lulled her into a sense of peace. "You always did overthink things, shy away from adventure out of fear of change or the unknown." Then he shrugged and his arm brushed hers. "No doubt the bold miss who embarrassed me didn't have enough follow through." He tsked his tongue. "What has happened to you that you are at such a pass?"

The peace he'd imparted vanished like mist before the sun. In its

place came hot anger. He had no right to judge her. They'd never discussed the future, and he'd certainly not asked her what she wanted from life. She narrowed her eyes. "This discussion is over, Mr. Winslow."

"Interesting that when conversation hits too close to home or necessitates you having to examine how you feel about certain things, you end it." He leaned away from her and slightly widened the space between them. "Will you always run, Evangeline?"

The sound of her name on his lips sent another host of tingles through her belly. Why did he make it seem as if his mouth caressed the word before releasing it upon the air? Which brought her attention to his lips. Did he now kiss with authority and experience behind him, or did he still give perfunctory and passionless pecks? "Perhaps. After all, isn't that what happens when one feels threatened?" Drat! Why did she continue to talk and offer bits of revelation about herself? She contemplated the window once more. "Please have your driver take me to my great uncle's townhouse in Berkeley Square."

Jasper snorted. "So, throwing yourself on the mercies of family is preferable to riding with me?" Low-grade annoyance infused the question.

It irritated her that he felt thusly, but then, he was justified. "At this moment, yes."

"Sacrificing your freedom by going back, are you? One can only wonder what horrible punishment upstanding members of the *ton* will find for a wayward daughter."

Evangeline rolled her eyes. "No doubt they will see it as permission to matchmake."

"Ah, I'm glad to know you find marriage to anyone objectionable, for I'd previously thought it was simply me you took issue with." The annoyance upgraded to full-blown hostility.

Oh dear. For the first time, she considered his feelings from that long-ago humiliation. No doubt she'd wounded him terribly. Her chin trembled. *None of that, Evangeline. You're stronger than this.* She straightened her spine and willed her emotion away. "Enough, Mr. Winslow." She made certain to emphasize his title. Using first names was too personal when she wished to maintain distance between them. Their shared history didn't matter; she was no longer that starry-eyed young lady of twenty-four who had dreams of grandeur, independence and success. There were now several years of experience on her, and she was older and wiser, if not successful. But she certainly wasn't defeated. She turned toward him, hoping he felt the fury in her gaze. Yet a part of her mourned the loss of what they'd once had together. "Do you mean to have words now?"

"Given that we're hardly in a drawing room or parlor, this carriage

is as good a place as any.” Matching anger clung to his response. “Perhaps you should start.”

She ignored him even as she marveled that this was the first time she’d ever seen such ire or heat in him. When they’d courted, he was ever the polite suitor, solicitous in his regard and rather lukewarm in his carriage. Nothing that curled her toes or set fire to her blood. Chaste and nothing a proper gentleman would be ashamed of. No heat had passed between them. That insipid bearing was one of the reasons she’d fled. After all, what would a marriage be if there was no passion in any aspect of life?

Above all, she did not want an empty *ton* union. There were too many of those in London, and she didn’t envy those people. She wanted... craved... excitement, thrills, that neck-or-nothing feeling of desire that would have her teetering on the edge of total consumption. She longed for a marriage like her grandmother had enjoyed, like her great-uncle Charles had had, like their parents before them. So many stories she’d grown up with touting such love-drenched affairs as those.

Are they a thing of the past, a nod to by-gone days? She thought of her parents and the fact they rarely showed affection for each other in public or even in front of her. *I do not wish for staid.* Something far away from the proper, stifling, oftentimes paper cut-out world of the *ton*. No gilded prisons for her.

Realizing he still awaited a response, she said, “If you cannot come to terms with our parting of ways, do let me know, and I will list the reasons why we were not compatible, even if you will not like them.” A sudden bout of exhaustion swept through her. What she wouldn’t give for a warm bed and a bracing cup of tea. None of her plans had turned out right, and seeing him again only highlighted those shortcomings. “This night has worn on my nerves and I would rather salvage what I can of the evening while making other arrangements.”

Silence greeted her, a great, roiling silence that grew stifling. All the while, he kept his intense, stormy gaze on her—assessing, questioning, wondering. Finally, she sighed. Of course he wouldn’t wish for a row to air grievances and put their failed relationship firmly behind them because he probably had been haunted with why she’d done it.

“Shocking that you refuse to explain.”

“Not now.” It was for the best. “On second thought, direct your driver to the Clarendon.” Surely after she claimed connections to the Archewyne name, the hotel would extend her credit. It was the better alternative than offering herself up to the altar of matrimony.

Telling him her reasoning would wound him deeper. That she couldn’t bear, for when all was said and done, she still cared for him

and wished to see him happy. He deserved better than her. Perhaps she had saved him from embarrassment all those years ago, for had their names been linked and she'd attempted to find her path while married, he would have been shocked and disappointed. The knowledge brought swift tears stinging her eyes and she blinked them away.

"A rather fancy address for a woman with no funds and no companion." He whipped off his hat, shoved a hand through the partially damp tresses and then replaced the head gear, regardless of the errant droplets he'd dislodged. Raven hair she'd always wondered if it was soft, but had never had the daring to find out for herself. "However, in answer to your earlier inquiry, yes, I would enjoy an explanation as to why you left me, for you never gave one, and I've always speculated."

Dread knotted her stomach. Never did she think he would call in her bluff. She stared at him with a healthy dose of wariness. Where had the meek second son of a viscount gone in the intervening years? When had this assertive, self-assured man come to dwell in his place? "Well then. I shall give it a go." Perhaps if they could discuss what happened and why she'd run with grace and dignity, she could finally be free of him, both physically in the present and from her thoughts—the thoughts that always dogged her when she was tired or second guessing her decisions.

"Not here."

"I beg your pardon?" What devilry was he about? Did he not just agree to a discussion? Did he not just tell her the carriage was as good a place as any?

The conveyance rocked to a halt as he explained. "I have rooms above my emporium. Perhaps we can take tea together, share a meal and converse like civilized people in front of a cheery fire in my parlor."

For the second time that evening, Evangeline's jaw dropped. She couldn't determine which shocking statement to respond to first. "I beg your pardon?" It bore repeating. What other surprises would this night hold?

He flicked a dark eyebrow upward. Humor flitted through his expression before the familiar annoyance replaced it. "Since we parted, I have become a chocolatier of some acclaim throughout London. I run Winslow's Chocolate Emporium and Confectionary."

Of course! She'd passed the Emporium dozens of times while in London but never in her wildest imaginings did she think that his name was linked to the shop. The sweet, rich aroma of chocolate, vanilla and sugar invaded her nostrils with phantom scents, and if she closed her eyes, she could see the window displays full of bonbons and

chocolates topped with sugar flowers, discern the sugar-molded Easter eggs decorated with colorful icing with adorable scenes inside also made of sugar. Her stomach rumbled and her respect for him rose. It took great skill to make such sweets.

"You work a trade?" My how the mighty had indeed fallen. When he'd courted her, he had no aspirations and had been content in riding the coattails of his father and brother. He'd wished for nothing more than to enter whole-heartedly into that glittering world of the idle. "How did you convince your family to let you?" Despite her current circumstances, curiosity ran away with her thoughts.

"No one 'lets' me do anything. I am a self-made man."

"Oh." What did one say to that?

"If you wish to know the answers to that question and any more you might have regarding how I've spent my life after you left me, my dear Miss Bradenwilde, you shall have to accept my invitation to a late dinner and tea." He twisted the handle to the door and once the panel swung open, he hopped out of the carriage without another word.

Drat that man! She sat immobile as her mind spun with a thousand inquiries. What did any of this mean to her now beyond satisfying a few lingering ponderations?

Jasper turned back toward her with a hand extended, and when she assumed he meant to offer her assistance down, he merely grasped the handle of his valise and pulled it from the carriage. Rain beat upon his hat and wetted the shoulders of his overcoat. "Now or never. Like you said, we either lay the past to rest this night, or we will both forever wonder and suffer unanswered questions."

Double drat him, and devil take his eyes too. She stifled a snort at her proclivity toward the vulgar when expressing herself. When he would have turned away from the carriage, she halted him. "Jasper, wait." And darn him for making her use his given name. Where had the barriers gone she'd so carefully erected between them?

"Yes?"

"I accept your invitation with thanks." At least she'd remove herself from this dreary cold rain. That fire he mentioned sounded very good indeed. "I would adore a hot cup of tea."

"Excellent." This time he extended his free hand and helped her down from the carriage. As soon as her feet landed on the ground, he released his hold. "I'll escort you into the shop then grab your luggage. After that, we'll discuss many things, the least of which where you plan to pass the storm."

As he uttered those words, the intensity of the rain picked up and wind threw the angry drops of moisture into her face.

Laying bare her soul for his censure and mockery left her stomach

quaking and cold shivers lancing down her spine. Knowing the truth of the matter would put hurt into his eyes twisted her stomach. It would be a long night indeed, but at the end of it, she would finally be free of him.

Without guilt? She could only hope.

Chapter 3

Where did his resolve to leave her to fate go?

Jasper cursed himself for a fool many times over as he unlocked the door to his emporium. As the panel swung open, a bell attached tinkled in greeting. "Please, make yourself at home. I'll return straightaway with your luggage." He set his valise down inside the shop and then stood aside for Evangeline to pass.

"Thank you for the kindness."

Kindness? Making certain a lady was sheltered from less than ideal weather wasn't kindness, was it? Expected and what a gentleman should do, of course, but since when would it not be an inherent response that someone needed to go out of their way and thank him for it?

Still, he nodded and caught a faint, delicate, elusive floral scent. What was it? Not readily able to identify the perfume, he returned to the carriage. Wind-driven rain slashed at his clothing and sent chilly drops down the back of his neck. With the driver's help, they lugged the trunk and the carpetbag into the shop, and once it was set down on the white-and-black checked marble, Jasper paid the other man. With a murmured good night, he closed the door sharply behind him. The tinkling of the shop bell, once cheerful but now ominous, rang in the silence that followed.

Devil take this night. He stifled the urge to yawn. Too knackered to do much else other than stare as she removed her hat, he said, "Um, shall we adjourn upstairs?" When her eyes rounded, he cleared his throat. Perhaps that didn't sound as congenial as it was intended. "For talking and to take tea only. My intentions are honorable." The silence built between them and he sighed. "Or, if you'd rather, I can put the kettle on here in the shop."

Evangeline stabbed the long pin into the crown of her straw hat. "I think perhaps that would be the most logical choice." She cast a glance about the immediate area the second he flipped a switch and soft electric illumination flooded the cozy shop, glinting off the glass display cases and the glass canisters that lined the shelves behind the

high wooden counter. What did the emporium look like to her eyes?

Inside the cases, a vast collection of sweetmeats rested, ready for eager patrons. Comfits, which were sugar-and-spice-coated nuts; confits—candied fruit. He had a display of sugarplums—sugar heated and hardened into rounds or different molded shapes like roses or fruits or a few animals, and the ever-popular bonbons, caramels, French creams or marzipan. Pride tugged at him. He and his assistant had created all of this with their own hands... and the help of punch machines for the hard candies as well as copper kettle drums that allowed chocolate and sugar to melt without constant stirring.

The last five years of his life hadn't been wasted. In fact, he really should thank Evangeline for the curtesy of refusing him. Had he gone on to marry her as he'd planned, would he have had the courage to open the shop or even learn a trade? Interesting concept, that. In marriage, what would he have done with his life, and would he have stumbled upon his ambition?

"I have always wondered what the inside of this place looked like." The dulcet tones of her voice recalled his attention to her, and he started, almost forgetting she stood within the culmination of his life's work.

"Why have you never come in?" That would have been a trick. Imagine looking up from his creating and spying her coming through the door.

"I'm not certain." She moved along the counter, intently studying the sweets behind the glass and in the jars. "Perhaps I was not properly motivated. More to the point, I never had the time to linger in any of the shops while in London. I am always bound by appointments or catching trains."

What had called her away? A wry smile twisted his lips. "If you had, I suppose this impending conversation would have occurred that much sooner. We might not even be here in this moment." If they'd both met each other before and conducted a proper goodbye, would she be married to someone else? A stab of jealousy gripped him for a fictional man he'd not met doing a deed that had not occurred. He shot a speculative glance her way, but nothing in her bearing revealed her marital status.

Buggar that. It matters not. He'd do well to remember.

"True." To a casual observer one would never know he and she shared a history. Is this what they'd become now, strangers struggling to find a topic of mutual interest? "How did you embark on such an occupation?"

Jasper removed his gloves and then tossed them onto a marble-inlaid table. "Because of you, actually." He shrugged out of his overcoat and draped it over the back of a dainty, wrought iron chair.

“Me?” Shock exploded around the one-word inquiry. “What had I to do with it?” She whipped off her gloves.

“Well, when a man is as soundly humiliated as I was, he must find something completely different and far removed from his previous life as he can.” Jasper didn’t care that the words might be too harsh. He was never given a chance to ask why she’d left, let alone offered the opportunity to fix what might have gone wrong between them.

“I thought you would have landed on your feet, much like a cat, and you could have depended upon your family. You were always resourceful.” Her shoulders drooped a bit, but she didn’t face him. “It was for the best. You would have come to see that sooner or later.” The last was said in a whisper so he had to drift closer in order to hear. “We wouldn’t have been happy with marriage.”

A muscle at the corner of his left eye began to twitch—a sure sign his ire was up. “We will never know.” Why did she not understand that marriage between two people was a work in progress, where each party stood by the other in times of both trial and triumph? “You had no right to decide that for me.” Feeling confident he had the upper hand, he moved behind the display cases. At the back counter, he filled a copper tea kettle with water from the nearby faucet then set it on the adjacent small stove. When the flame kissed the kettle’s bottom, he finally turned and found Evangeline as she inspected a case of bonbons as if her life depended upon it.

“I did not, yet I had every right to decide what was best for me.” She straightened and caught his gaze. “You had no right to set my future for me.” With efficient movements, she tossed her gloves onto a table and then she worked the buttons down the front of her long, green jacket. Once the final one popped free of its hole, she shrugged out of the drenched garment.

His eyebrows sailed into his hairline. “As if marriage to me was akin to being chained by the ankle to an ogre under his bridge.”

“Don’t be droll, Jasper. It’s not becoming.” Evangeline held up the limp velvet. “Is there a hook or coat rack or shall I tote this around like a parcel?”

Embarrassment burned up the back of his neck. “Yes. Just there.” He gestured toward the corner nearest the door even as he roved his gaze up and down her person. The ivory blouse trimmed with lace was sheer enough that he glimpsed an equally lace-edged camisole beneath. The green velvet skirt with its smart brown, wide, leather belt emphasized her slender waist and the flair of her rounded hips. Time had indeed been kind to her, or rather had further enhanced the beauty she’d always had. With effort, he wrenched his attention away and checked the near-boiling water in the kettle. “Pardon me for not being as solicitous as I should.” What an idiot he was to not invite her

to remove her wet clothes.

“As I said before, it has been a trying night—apparently for both of us.” After she’d hung up the garment, she drifted toward one of the tiny, round tables that seated two and then alighted upon a wrought iron chair. The volume of her skirting swallowed up the dainty piece. In the process of arranging said skirting, he caught sight of a trim ankle encased in a serviceable pair of brown leather half-boots. At the last second, he stifled a groan. Had they been able to work out the issues separating them years ago, he could have intimately known that siren’s body.

Dear God in heaven, help me not make a fool of myself.

“Indeed.” He cleared his throat and was thankful to spend the next few minutes attending to preparing the tea. The turn of her ankle or the voluptuousness of her figure didn’t tempt him in the least. What he needed to do was pick a fight, one he’d been craving ever since he’d seen her alone on that platform. He wanted her to hurt the way she had hurt him five years ago, the way he still ached now whenever he thought of what could have been. “In any event, shortly after you showed me how much I was worth in your eyes, I experienced a crisis of identity.”

Silence reigned through the emporium as he loaded a tea tray with all the accoutrements of that repast. Giving into the wild streak of devilry residing deep down inside, he added a small plate to the tray and placed a collection of four bonbons on it. It was what he fondly called the “broken heart” assortment. Actually, it was quite a decent seller among both males and females, which was why he’d not retired it after he’d laid Evangeline’s defection to rest.

Once he’d carried the tray to the table and set it down, he took the seat across from her, and in the small space between them, their knees knocked. A jolt akin to electricity zipped from the point of contact up through his groin. Briefly, he closed his eyes. He’d missed that feeling, that shot of excitement being around her caused. Jasper quickly rearranged his chair so accidental touching couldn’t reoccur. “Please, help yourself. You’ve made no secret how independent and capable you are. I’m sure something as trivial as tea shouldn’t be an issue.”

Her eyes narrowed and he tamped down the urge to crow with victory. “Thank you for the reminder.” The words were clipped and as cold as the rain and the wind howling outside. While she poured out a cup, not bothering with sugar or milk, he leaned back in his chair. “So you decided to bury your angst in confections then?”

“Right.” There was a story yet to tell. “I was conflicted in my mind, and since there was no danger of me needing to attend to the title—my brother is quite hale and hearty you see—my parents urged me to go out into the world and find my way. To make something of

myself.”

“How lovely to have such freedom.” Her hand shook as she raised her cup to her lips.

“It is, rather.” Jasper prepared his own cup, adding milk and one cube of sugar. “I traveled through Europe for many months. Many of the grand places inspired me. All of the people I met added to the yearning of my soul.” He took a sip of his tea and savored the warmth as he swallowed. “In France, I discovered what it was I wanted above all else.”

“And that was?” One of her eyebrows arched as if she found his recounting trite and insipid.

“Chocolate making.” A grin tugged at his lips as he remembered the year he’d spent in Paris. At first, he’d visited every confectionary and patisserie he could find in the city, coming back again and again to his favorites. And then he took rooms in order to study his passion, but it wasn’t until a chocolatier caught him more or less deconstructing an assortment of confections that his destiny arrived. “I was invited to work under a famous chocolatier in Paris, which I gladly did, for little pay and long hours, just to be closer to the chocolates I’d fallen in love with.”

“How nice that you found fulfillment.” Bitter annoyance rang through her words, but her expression remained impassive.

He frowned. What had her life become that brought her to such aggravation? “I thought so. All those months, I lived and breathed the art. I ate more chocolate than real food. I learned so much that finally the chocolatier turned me out with his blessing, and hoped I didn’t practice my new vocation in Paris else I’d run him out of business.” His chuckle echoed in the empty shop. “Once I returned home to England, I was filled with a new purpose, a new life. I go back to Paris in the spring every year to keep current on my craft and to visit my friend Jacques, the man who taught me everything.” He spread wide his arms, regardless of the teacup still in his hand. “Now, here we are.”

“You have done well for yourself.” She took another sip of tea and then set the cup down on its saucer as she contemplated the sweets and small cakes on the tray.

“I have.” He swallowed down the remainder of his tea. “Please, try the bonbons. They’re a particular favorite with my customers.” Watching her, he set his cup into its saucer. What would she think of the flavors he’d put together? His stomach muscles clenched. Why did he care to hear her opinion?

“What do you call them?” She peered at the four rounded confections, each one filled with a different sweet surprise.

“They’re my broken heart collection and are quite the balm for

customers who come in besieged with maudlin thoughts of romantic woes. You see, chocolate and sweets pair nicely with coffee or tea, as well as a listening ear.” He grinned when she sucked in a quick breath. “As I mentioned, inspired by you, Miss Bradenwilde. This collection was one of my first attempts for sale. I have yet to retire it.”

She selected one, brought it to her mouth and bit into it, and then was obliged to catch the dribble of blueberry syrup off her chin with a finger. Would she taste the sweet fruit as it contrasted with the slight bitterness of the chocolate, perceive the faint floral of the syrup amidst the sugar? “This is lovely. What do you call it?”

“Uh...” Fascinated when she licked the syrup from her finger, he cleared his throat. “Its name is Disappointment. It’s a nice, smooth milk chocolate with blueberry syrup.”

“I see.” Evangeline snorted. She laid the uneaten portion of the bonbon on her plate. The dark indigo liquid oozed out onto the porcelain plate. “Blue for sadness.”

“Yes. Broken hearts do that to a man, you know.”

Her lips parted and her eyes widened. “I broke your heart?”

Drat. Flew too close to the flame. “Not important.” He pointed to another bonbon. “The next is Rage, filled with a spiced chocolate cream.” He moved on to the next one. “Denial, which is filled with lemon marzipan, and finally Acceptance, and that is filled with vanilla buttercream.”

“Clever. And exasperating.” One of her eyebrows quirked. “You were never that way before.”

That was odd. “How was I before?”

“Calm. Predictable. Almost conducting your life by rote.” She selected the last one and once she’d tried it, a tiny smile curved her mouth—those damn kissable lips that he should have sampled more than he had when he’d courted her. Why had he never made that effort? “This is wonderful.”

“Thank you. I think so too.”

She nibbled on all the bonbons and then chased the sweets down with sips of tea. Once she was finished, a wash of pink stained her cheeks. Never say she felt embarrassment for what she’d done to him? Good, at least it was more than she’d apparently held for him that fateful afternoon. Then, immediately contrite for his uncharitable thoughts, he dropped his gaze to the tea tray. What else was there to say to her now that they’d grown into strangers?

“I am sorry you had a tough go of it after our relationship ended.” Her words, said in a near whisper, carried emotion behind them he couldn’t identify.

“Think nothing of it. Unsavory things happen and one must trudge through. Stiff upper lip and all that.” What a stupid rejoinder that

was. *Have I forgotten how to converse with this woman? She's merely someone I knew at one time.* That was just the ticket. Jasper cleared his throat. What they'd shared belonged in the past. "I like to think such trials build character and change a man for good." Perhaps she was correct and they hadn't been right for each other back then. Now, they'd both matured into completely different people, so why was conversation so forced and deuced strained? "You look well. Obviously, independence and self-sufficiency have done wonders for you."

"Thank you." She picked up her teacup and took another few sips. Once she'd returned the vessel to its saucer, she said, "Are you happy, Jasper? Do you enjoy the life you've carved out for yourself?" This time, the emotion clouding her eyes was sadness. For him or for what she'd thrown away?

That was a dratted difficult topic, wasn't it? He glanced at his teacup, the tray, her half-eaten bonbons, anywhere that would delay the necessity of meeting her gaze, but eventually he did so, and held it evenly. "Yes, I am happy. This business is everything I never knew I wanted, and it fulfills a deep-seated need within me to forge my own path. But content?" He shrugged. "That is infinitely harder to obtain, for that covers more aspects of life than making one's way."

"Indeed, and so incredibly true." She dropped her gaze to her lap where she twisted her fingers together. "Have you found love? That would go a long way in meeting contentment."

Another hard question. He rubbed a hand along his jaw and wished he'd never spied her upon that platform, abandoned, wet and in great need, still as enticing to him as she'd been all those years ago. "No, I have not, but Mother never ceases in her efforts at playing matchmaker." And that was a nigh impossible task, for how could he ever come to care for another when his heart wasn't fully free from Evangeline's hold? No matter how he'd tried over the years, he couldn't forget her. Perhaps that was the greatest irony. Constantly thinking about a woman he couldn't have, one who didn't want him. How did a man shake off the residual feelings for the woman who'd shattered that organ? "Apparently, making one's own path isn't enough to satisfy one's parents."

"I see." She selected a vanilla scone and nibbled at one corner but said nothing else.

He couldn't summon the courage to ask if she'd embarked on a new romance. Would that be the final blow for his abused heart? Instead, he merely observed as she enjoyed the pastry. When a crumb clung to the corner of her full lips, he was gripped by an insane desire to vault over the table, take her into his arms and kiss away that bit of scone. Such foolishness. *Perhaps I haven't consigned her or my feelings as*

firmly to the past as I should have.

She lifted her gaze to his, all trace of maudlin displays gone. "I am glad that your life is something to be proud of."

Why did her opinion on it infuse him with such hope? He shoved it away. No use going down that road. "Perhaps. Beyond the emporium, I invested in steel, rails and steam technology. Over the course of the years, I've a fortune in my own right." He waved a hand to encompass the shop. It was important to impress upon her that he was a man of some consequence now, in the event that was the reason she'd left him. "I have the freedom to do what I please without depending on my family's wealth. Perhaps, in the near future, I'll do a bit of traveling."

Hurt sprang into her expression. Evangeline dropped the scone onto her plate. "How nice for you. But then, men in our society have always had such luxuries." Frost had formed once more in her tone. "I should take my leave." She rose to her feet with an air of expectation.

Jasper stood as well. "It's late and the rain hasn't let up." He glanced toward the plate glass windows at the front of the shop. "Stay here. I've an apartment upstairs. You can take my bed." *Gah!* Where had that invitation come from?

Her lips formed an "O" of shock, which matched her rounded eyes. "Where will you sleep?"

At least she hadn't outright refused. "There is a sofa in the small parlor across from my bedroom. I shall rouse early to open the shop anyway," he rushed on when silence filled the space between them. "It is not an inconvenience, and I would rather see you safe tonight than chancing luck or fate out there." He cleared his throat. "And I don't wish for you to prostrate yourself before your family if that is a sacrifice you don't need to make."

Evangeline looked at the windows. Even an idiot couldn't ignore the slash of the wind-driven rain against the glass or fail to hear the howl as it whistled along the street. Finally, she nodded slightly. "Very well, but only for tonight. In the morning, I will go about my business."

Pleasure warmed the pit of his belly and he refused to analyze why. "Which would be what, Evangeline? For the rain isn't expected to relent and the tracks won't have been repaired."

She shook her head. "I will think of something."

It was pure madness to have her beneath the same roof as him, but what was done couldn't be undone. And they'd yet to talk about why their relationship died.

Perhaps they would still. The night wasn't all that advanced, and suddenly his exhaustion had fled in the face of foolish anticipation.

Chapter 4

Evangeline stared up at the plastered ceiling and sighed for what

had to be the tenth time since Jasper had shown her into his bedroom. Did an hour pass or had it been more time than that? She didn't know, for her mind had continued to plague her with thoughts of what she should have said, done, responded.

She turned onto her side, but that proved to be problematic, for his cedar and sage scent lingered on the pillow beneath her cheek. The whiff of that soap, with the faintest hint of lime, reminded her of spending time in his company years ago, of being so close to him that his smell intoxicated her to the point she'd waited for his kiss. In vain, of course, for when he had kissed her during their courtship, those pecks had been uninspired.

Perhaps if she had known how things would have ended between them, of how lonely her life would have been in her pursuit of freedom, she would have taken the initiative and kissed him first. Would he have risen to the occasion and honed amorous skills, gone farther than removing the pins from her hair to see her tresses down? A thrill went through her core as she imagined such an embrace that would have started innocent enough but would have perhaps ended with each of them in some degree of undress and hands and lips exploring skin and limbs.

With a sigh, she flopped onto her back and once more contemplated the shadow-shrouded ceiling. Since she'd neglected to close the drapes and there was no maid or servants of any sort in this strictly bachelor abode, the tracks of rain on the window pane made interesting patterns upon the wall and ceiling plaster that moved ever so slowly through the room.

Much like her life. The going was difficult and slow, yet she didn't have much to show for the struggle, had little to talk about, but she was compelled to tell him everything, even if it portrayed her in a poor light. He had shared so many aspects of his life, even down to the collection of bonbons he'd created after she'd left him with a broken heart.

Guilt poked her gut like the insistent stab of a pin. Had he loved her back then? The thought brought heat into her cheeks. He must have, for why else would he have intended to offer her marriage? Yet his actions had never indicated such. Their courtship had been perfunctory at best. That didn't win a girl's heart. Or her respect.

Had she loved him? Her throat constricted. She thought she had, or perhaps she had loved the idea of being in love, for the reality of that and the subsequent potential marriage had terrified her. What exactly was love then? Shouldn't such an emotion have counteracted the fear? *Perhaps I didn't love him enough.*

She struggled upright, flung off the bedclothes and then swung her legs over the edge of the bed. *I need to talk to him.* Regardless of the time of night or that she was clad in a white cotton nightgown, she stood. The neck was high enough and the sleeves and skirt long enough that nothing shocking was displayed. And now was as good a time as any, for she'd let anger carry her away from him earlier that night before she'd had the chance to set the record straight.

If they were to be parted in the morning, she wanted no more misunderstandings between them. She wanted free of the memories of him, and then perhaps her life would take on more success. No matter what, she couldn't remain in his bed any longer, haunted by the scent of him, tortured with thoughts of what might have been between them, or dying a thousand deaths with the thought that he'd pleased women on that very bed. Regardless of the fact that he'd admitted to not having a love interest, romance and coitus were not the same thing, and they weren't mutually exclusive.

Evangeline shook her head and forced those thoughts away. What Jasper did was no longer her concern. When dawn came, they would have nothing else to say to each other, and they would finally write "the end" to their history together.

I will never see him again. The knowledge brought tears to her eyes, and with annoyance, she dashed them away. It was merely mourning the loss of a friendship, nothing more.

She crossed the hardwood on silent, bare feet and when she cracked open the door, she paused to listen. Nothing stirred from the small parlor across the way except the ever-present sound of the beating rain and the loud pound of her heart. The second she pulled the panel wider, soft snoring issued from that location. Once more, she hesitated, this time just outside the bedroom. Jasper snored. What a wholly endearing discovery. It made him more human, more approachable, as if he weren't the paragon of virtue, the product of a traditional *ton* family she'd made him out to be.

Drat.

Then she forced the thought away, locked it into the box in her

mind where all thoughts of what might have been dwelled. It mattered not. Her future did not include the chocolatier, no matter that his new personality intrigued her at every turn.

Darkness and shadows shrouded the parlor. Furniture loomed as imposing sentinels and obstacles she navigated around on the hunt to locate him. She drew her fingertips along the back of a sofa featuring a high, scrolled woodworked back. Two matching chairs flanked it, and across a low table, another such piece rested. That was where Jasper lay, a plain woolen blanket covering his long frame, his stockinged feet sticking out from beneath the edge. As with the snoring, the socks gave him an approachable air and her heart squeezed. He looked so... domestic and dear.

Perhaps I shouldn't wake him.

As she stood in indecision, his snoring ceased and he blinked open his eyes. Upon seeing her, they widened and he sat up. The blanket slid down his chest, revealing his gray-and-white striped woolen pajamas. "Oh!" Startled by his sudden movement that yanked her back to reality, one hand flew to her throat, the much-washed lace of her nightdress tickling her palm. "I apologize for waking you."

"Is there cause for alarm?" He rubbed his eyes. Part of his hair on one side stuck straight up from his head and her fingers itched to smooth it back down. "Are you in peril?"

"No, no." She held up her other hand in an effort to calm him. "Please, do not distress yourself. All is well." When he narrowed his eyes and swept his gaze over her person, she became acutely aware of her lack of proper dress. Gooseflesh raced along her skin, and beneath the cotton of her gown, her nipples hardened into tight buds as his interest briefly lingered. *Double drat.* Scuttling around the table and taking refuge on the opposite sofa, she tucked her legs beneath her, making certain to hide her naked toes as well as to pull the fabric away from her body. "I thought to come out here and talk if you found yourself as restless and sleepless as I, but you are not." *Cheeky man.*

He snorted. "I am awake now, so let's not waste it."

"Very well." How did one broach the subject of one's life after one made a muck of someone else's?

"What did you wish to talk about?" Jasper raked his fingers through his hair, returning the tresses to some semblance of order. He adjusted his position on the sofa as if he were entertaining during proper hours instead of the middle of the night when they were both scandalously under-dressed.

"Me." How selfish that sounded. "Or rather, what I have filled my time with since we... since you and I..."

"Since you ran from Hedgebourne Grange without a backward

glance?" Wry humor clung to the question.

It had been a marvelous summer day and the sun was hot. Even now she swore she could feel its heat upon her cheeks. She'd worn an amethyst gown that afternoon in deference to his liking of the color, the flounces and lace on the skirt a particular favorite of hers. As they'd walked through the gardens on the estate, hand in hand, she'd talked of inconsequential things, never knowing of his proposal plans. After the incident, she'd donated the gown to a friend, for she'd been unable to look upon it without foul memories or tears. She narrowed her eyes as doubt and sadness crowded her chest. "Thank you for never failing to remind me of that day."

"I cannot help it, for that moment was the redefinition of our relationship. And my life." When he reached for a box of matches that rested near an oil lamp, she shook her head.

"Please don't. At times, delicate conversation such as this is best done in the concealing shadows." At least then any emotions she might reveal would remain hidden from him. Not for worlds did she wish to appear vulnerable.

"Very well." Jasper leaned back against the gray crushed velvet, and she suspected it matched his eyes. "You have my attention." He arranged the blanket over his lap.

"For months after I returned to London, I was confounded as to what I should do with my life." She pleated the voluminous skirt of her nightdress. "I was ashamed of myself for leaving without an explanation."

"And so you should have been," he agreed without giving quarter. "I shouldn't have been the only one to suffer."

"You were not." Guilt twisted in her belly. Every day for weeks she'd berated herself. "My mother let me wallow for a while, and then one morning, she entered my room and told me I had to move forward with my life. She'd made an appointment with a dressmaker. It was time for me to circulate within the *ton* and attract a husband." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "My dear parents, having taken notice that their offspring was underfoot and gripped with a blue mood, decided I needed to make connections, and that meant furthering their reach with an advantageous marriage, as is the fate of every woman regardless of what their dreams and aspirations may be."

"Were you successful in that much-crowded pool?" His voice was guarded and the fingers of one hand dug into the cushion of the sofa.

"Let's say I avidly protested the men my mother was inclined to shove at me." A brief smile curved her lips. Frustration didn't adequately express what she put her parents through, but none of the men felt right. None could live up to what Jasper had brought to her

days even when he'd been starched and proper. "Eventually, there was a gentleman I became interested in."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "He was not one of the austere, stodgy, traditional-minded men my mother approved of. In fact, none of my family signed off on the match." Perhaps that what had attracted her to the man in the first place—he wasn't remotely like the men she'd had paraded before her. "Frances was a merchant who ran a successful shipping outfit. He courted me for six months."

"Did you love him?" The words were low and seemed pulled from his throat.

Silence built between them. The answer would not reflect well on her, but then, nothing in this telling would. "No." She swallowed hard but held Jasper's gaze, proud that hers didn't waver. "I thought I could eventually, so I let him continue to court me. He was a fine enough man, and easy on the eyes. Then he proposed. I thought marriage was what I wanted."

"Obviously, you held your stance on that." Bitterness roiled through his response. "How soon was this after you'd parted with me?"

"By that time, perhaps a year and a half."

"I see." He flung himself off the sofa, his blanket falling unheeded to the floor. In his stocking feet and pajamas, he paced the short space in front of the furniture. "So then it wasn't the thought of tying yourself to me that you found objectionable after all. You are merely dead set against matrimony."

"I'm not." How could she explain the convoluted thoughts to him when she didn't fully understand them herself? "The concept of marriage is a weighty thing. After a man is wed, his life continues on much like it always has. When a woman weds, her whole existence is required to change, and she is more or less expected to be a dutiful wife, mother, housekeeper and flawless host."

Jasper scoffed. "This is abhorrent to you?"

"No. Yes." She sighed. "I am not sure that is the life I wish for. It is a prison, complete with golden shackles."

"Preposterous notion." He stared at her. "If two people love each other, marriage is the next logical step in a relationship, as is becoming a wife and mother." His voice lowered. "However, if a woman does not wish to become pregnant, there are ways and devices readily available to prevent such an occurrence, if one only aspires to be a wife."

Would he make that sacrifice? "Perhaps, but a man wouldn't willingly offer that, for isn't it the duty of a gentleman in society to further his line?"

Another long swath of silence fell over them. Then he spoke, his voice still low and intense. "The line, in my case, has been furthered by my brother's children. Also, if a man loved his wife enough, he wouldn't care what society wanted. He would defer to her wishes, for that is what perfect love does."

She rolled her eyes. "Logic has nothing to do with love and neither does perfection."

"That's the first sensible thing you've said since the train platform." When he turned to her, a smile tipped up one corner of his mouth. "You're correct. Love should never be logical. It should be all-consuming and silly and insane. It should defy common sense and make a person feel as if they could fly..." His voice trailed off as he stared, and then he cleared his throat. "Perhaps love is an overrated affliction, and in saying so, it is rarely perfect."

"I agree."

"To which part?" He stopped pacing and sank into his original spot.

"I agree with everything you just said about love. It should be a swift, sure *something* that two people tumble headlong into, complete with desire and the knowledge that the future will work itself out because of that love." It was something she and Jasper hadn't shared and had led to her flight.

He quirked an eyebrow. "Conversing, talking about one's fears with one's partner is key." His eyes glittered in the dim flash of faraway lightning filtering in through the window at his back. The rain beat against the glass with relentless precision. "You were not in love with me five years ago." It was a statement, more of a realization than a question.

"I wouldn't say it that way." Now they were in the thick of it. She smoothed a hand over her nightgown and then began pleating it all over again. "I was fond of you, of course."

"Fondness doesn't equate to the sort of love you spoke of." Resignation filled his tone. His gaze jogged away from hers.

"No." Best to tell the truth and be done with it. "Perhaps I loved you too much, and the enormity of all that entailed frightened me."

"I would have been by your side, fighting every imagined threat, making certain I was your anchor during the storms."

Tears prickled the backs of her eyelids. Such pretty words had the power to pull her back under, lure her into the web of a lifestyle she didn't want. Time to snip that thread for good. "There was no passion, no zest in our connection." She encouraged the long braid of her hair over one shoulder and finger-combed the end above the ribbon that held it bound. "I... I needed more from you, for I could never commit myself to a dreary, lackluster marriage."

“At least now I have a reason.” He rubbed a hand along his jaw and the side of his face. “I was without amorous intent. Regardless of how well we suited in other aspects of our lives, this was, for you, the one sticking point.”

“I would say instead you were too much a gentleman. Perhaps you were too polite.” Evangeline shook her head but couldn’t dislodge the tight ball of emotion in her throat. When said aloud, it sounded petty, but that wasn’t her point at all. Why shouldn’t a woman wish for passion-filled kisses and thrilling embraces from her suitor? “I didn’t want proper and stodgy, Jasper. I didn’t want another fine, upstanding member of the *ton* who has had all the excitement and personality bred out of him.”

“That was made painfully obvious. How silly of me to propose, then. How disappointed you must have been.”

“Don’t be like that.” Her stomach muscles clenched at his sarcastic display. “It was five years ago. I hardly knew my own mind then let alone the state of my heart.” Not that she definitively knew it now. Could it be that she’d held Jasper up as an ideal, a measuring stick of sorts against every male she’d met after him? Worse, had she subconsciously found them all lacking, despite his lack of passion? Perhaps that had been an error in judgment on her part as well. She stared at him with the dark shadow of stubble clinging to his jaw. That queer little thrill zipped down her spine once more. She had consigned him to the past, hadn’t she?

“You could have given me the courtesy of being honest. We could have talked.” The annoyance in his voice snapped her back to the conversation. “I could have changed or at the very least given a go to being that man you desire.”

Oh God. He had been willing to learn, and she hadn’t given him the time. “That’s all we ever did, don’t you see?” She unfolded herself, gaining her feet as restless energy filled her. “There is more to a romance than the art of conversation or how one looks or what one does while in a drawing room.” Why couldn’t he understand? “Answer me this. Did you love me?” Why did she want to know? Their relationship belonged to memories.

“Of course I did. The battered state of my heart confirmed that I felt something deep for you. It took copious amounts of time to heal.”

“The same could be said for wounded pride,” she said in a soft voice.

“Touché.” Jasper stretched an arm along the back of the sofa, looking for all the world like a man who had moved on from his broken engagement. “Our relationship might not have had the heat or bedazzlement of a comet streaking across the sky, but I was willing to wait for that fire to catch once we wed.”

“And I wanted that fire as insurance. I didn’t want connections or the accolades that would come from a sensible *ton* marriage. I certainly didn’t want the gilded cage such a union would bring.”

“Your view on such things is skewed,” he said softly. “It wouldn’t have been that way between us. I am not those men you are so afraid of; I do not live such a life. You are not those women. You couldn’t be prim or proper for all the Crown jewels. Together, we would have forged our own direction, turned society on its ear in our own way.”

Tingles played at the base of her spine and spread through her lower belly. Romantic words to be sure, but they came too late. There was nothing between them any longer. At least that’s what she had to remind herself because the alternative was too... glimmering with possibility... too terrifying. “At the time, the risk outweighed the reward.” *God, that makes me sound like a horrible person.* It was her turn to pace, which she did between the bedroom door and the sofa she’d recently vacated. “None of it matters now.” If that were true, why did she still yearn to know heated passion with a man as proof that love didn’t need to be staid in order to be a good match, and why did she wish that man would be him? “The people we once were, the things we once did, have no bearing on the present.”

“On this we are of an accord.” Except, his eyes narrowed and he stroked his chin, that telling gesture the same one he’d always had when he tried to puzzle something out. When he said nothing more, Evangeline’s chest squeezed. Had she wounded him so horribly that he couldn’t—or wouldn’t—forgive her? “What did you do with your life after you ran from your second unfortunate beau?”

She ignored the warmth infusing her cheeks. “I needed to escape London and everything it meant, so I went down to Brighton.”

“Why Brighton? It’s not exactly in style these days. Most folks travel the world when they want a change of scenery. Why did you not hie to Egypt or Italy or somewhere you’ve heard of in your grandmother’s stories?”

That pulled a tiny smile from her, but then, Jasper always had that knack. “Brighton is where Grandmother and my aunt reside, for Grandmother adores the sea and Aunt Adelaide looks after her.”

“So you resorted to passing the time with two old ladies.” Softly, he tsked his tongue. “That will hardly make a woman feel young.”

Despite herself, Evangeline snorted with laughter. “Indeed.” She didn’t realize how much she’d missed him making her laugh until now. Could they have worked everything out? It was too late to pursue such a thing. Pausing near the sofa, she rested a hand on the back of it. “My aunt had been in business for herself for years selling undergarments and corsets to her friends and their female family members. I became her apprentice. I’ve done it for three years.”

“You peddle corsets?” The next flash of lightning, closer now, saw his dark eyebrows rocketing into his hairline. “I cannot wait to hear what the unflappable Lady Jane said about that. Does she approve?”

“To a point.” Evangeline returned to her spot on the sofa and once more drew her legs beneath her. “She realizes women in today’s world want to make their own way and earn their own money. And she thinks it’s highly entertaining. However, such an activity is seen as scandalous in some circles, mainly those my mother travels in.” She huffed a sigh that stirred tendrils of escaped hair on her forehead. “It’s not as if my aunt and I are as gauche as to have a shop. We do private fittings in homes at the discretion of our clients.”

“I don’t know that it makes a difference, Evie. Corsets and undergarments will always be seen as scandalous to those with no imaginations.” When she gasped at his use of the nickname he’d given her long ago, he cleared his throat. “Er, I mean, is hawking underpinning interesting work?”

“To a certain extent, but thankless no matter how I help women with their varying figures.” He didn’t need to know all the mean and hateful things some of her clients said about each other instead of focusing how amazing each of them looked in the satin corsets or lace-trimmed combinations. “And no one wants to pay the prices such private fittings entail. Time and again I hear that ready-made clothing is more affordable even if it is lesser quality.”

“That isn’t a falsehood.”

“No, it’s not, but all of those ready-made product in stores aren’t tailor-made for each individual client.” Again, she fell to pleating the fabric of her nightdress. “Exact fit doesn’t come cheap, and neither should it. A corset is personal and should fit a woman’s figure like a second skin. It should move with her, enhance her body, not rub and chafe because measurements are off by an inch here or there for the sake of convenience.” It was one of the reasons she’d consented to help her aunt with sales. She enjoyed the sensual nature of undergarments and how pretty things that fit well could give a woman confidence. Once someone had that, there was no limit to where said woman could go or what she would do.

“I’ll wager your sales are struggling against the surge of manufactured goods. Factories are cropping up everywhere these days.”

It wouldn’t do to lie to him at his point. She wanted a clean confession of everything her life currently held. Only then could she start over again with a clear conscience. “Yes. It’s a miserable thing at times. It makes me want to run screaming from the room and quit the business altogether. But what is the alternative? If I return home on the heels of this failure, Mother will be all the more unlikely to let me

leave unless I'm wed."

Silence brewed between them as Jasper stared at her but didn't quite see her. More like he looked through her. Gooseflesh popped on her skin. What did he see, and was she lacking? The longer he contemplated, stroking his chin, the more uncomfortable she grew. Couple that with the low growl and rumble of faraway thunder and her nerves became more frayed.

Finally, he nodded and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his splayed knees. "Underpinnings are much like chocolates; each piece is unique. Everyone won't agree on a flavor or style, fabric or fit. You need a gimmick, a pitch of the best corset or the best undergarments you have. Something flashy and personal that will catch the eye and grab your clients' desires."

She rolled her eyes. "I am rather rubbish at sales. I know that, and a gimmick smacks as a con. I refuse to partake in something like that. If it means the business suffers, so be it. Besides, I don't see how a gimmick will help sell corsets anyway."

"Perhaps." He stared at her, his stormy eyes assessing and intense in each flash of lightning. "Is this your dream?"

"Selling undergarments?" Her grin was wry. "No, but independence is." The smile faltered under his unwavering regard. "I refuse to depend on a man or family money to see me through life. I want to know that I can stand on my own power. I want the assurance that I can be more than someone's wife, someone's hostess or someone's mother."

"I understand. Perhaps all too well." He leaned back, the power of his gaze directed elsewhere. "You and I aren't as different as you wish to believe."

But she had to keep believing that; otherwise, running from him all those years ago was for naught. If they weren't all that different, if the only thing separating them was the lack of passion on his part and if he was willing to work on that, what was keeping them apart other than her fear of what the future held? "I want more than society can—or will—give me, as a woman, as a person. I don't want what's expected, or what is traditional." Even now, in the talking of it, her palms grew moist as panic rose in her chest. Clinging to the same old excuse sounded thin even to her own ears.

A grin curved his sensuous lips. That gesture transformed his face and set amusement dancing in his eyes. Again, she fantasized about what those lips would feel like if he nibbled a path down the side of her throat to her breasts and... "Somehow, I doubt your family is traditional. You've told me enough stories that I know it's not true."

His words yanked her back to the present. "My mother is extremely traditional, which is amusing since her sister is the

opposite.” She answered his grin with one of her own. It was so easy with Jasper, this sharing of confidences. “Mother married well and is scandalized by Grandmother’s life and stories.”

“And that makes you all the more determined to break away, to be like Lady Jane.”

“Yes.” Her grandmother had traveled all over the world even before she was married. Why couldn’t she enjoy the same freedom?

“You know,” he lowered his voice once more, and the thrilling whisper ran over her like the slightest caress. “The right marriage would still afford you the freedom you crave.”

Her jaw dropped. “It’s neither here nor there.” God, what a lie that was.

“If you don’t wish to be traditional, what do you want to be?” His question took her by surprise.

Endless moments passed, marked by the ticking of a grandfather clock she’d spied on the lower level as she’d come upstairs. “I want to be happy. That’s all.” After the last five years, she simply coveted happiness that had been absent while she dealt with the struggle. So far, it had been elusive, and she couldn’t help but wonder if it was due to leaving the man in front of her. Every moment she’d spent with Jasper, she’d been acutely aware of being... happy. Yet the second he’d brought out that damned ring with its implications, it had changed into panic. With anxiety clawing through her chest, she scuttled up from her position on the sofa. Her heart pounded, her pulse rushed through her veins. Now was not the time to see her flaw in logic. Marriage to him had every possibility of being different, and now that chance was gone.

It was my fault. No matter what she thought in hindsight, their time together had reached its natural expiration date. “Thank you for listening. I’d needed to tell you certain things for a while. Goodnight.”

Before he could utter a response, she fled the tiny parlor and didn’t stop until the door to his bedroom was safely closed behind her.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Jasper worked in the tiny back room where he

crafted his chocolates and sweets while his assistant tended to any customers who might drift in at such an unfashionably early hour.

In his experience, the need for chocolate and confections had no set time. Customers wanted them whenever the mood struck.

Before he'd come down to the store, he'd tiptoed into the bedroom to grab garments for the day. Evangeline slept on, tucked into his bed with the bedclothes drawn tight about her, the strawberry-blond braid of her hair slung like a snake over one shoulder. Though she'd surprised him with her midnight talk and confessions, he'd gained a few important insights that allowed him to understand her better.

She was not attached, and from her wistful expression when talking about it, she wished to be despite her misgivings. She wanted passion from a beau and future lover. That had sent blood pumping into his groin. He'd had no idea she was a lady who harbored such secret yearnings. It was one of the reasons he'd gone slow with her and had played the gentleman—he hadn't wanted to scare her away by showing his desire for her.

That thought had him snorting with derision. Not that it had mattered. She'd run out of fear anyway.

And lastly, she hadn't had much luck in her choice of occupation that was supposed to bring independence. The fact she peddled corsets and undergarments intrigued as well as aroused him. All this time that he assumed he'd known all there was to Evangeline Bradenwilde, and he'd barely scratched the surface. She wished for passionate embraces and worked a scandalous trade. What sort of woman was she truly? He didn't know, but he would find out in short order.

All of her problems could be solved, and quickly. A grin stretched across his face. And he'd be the man to do it. Why? Because her happiness was tied into his, and if there was a chance he could still be what she wanted—what she needed—he had to try. He glanced out the windows that overlooked the alley behind his building. Gloomy skies and persistent rain met his gaze—the perfect weather for

beginning a seduction of the woman he'd never quite gotten over.

Please God, let her be receptive.

As Jasper contemplated the delicate bonbon shells of thin chocolate he'd turned out of their rounded metal molds, he dug into a pocket of his vest and withdrew a delicate ring. The very ring he would have given to Evangeline on that fateful day he'd meant to propose—the ring that, when she caught sight of it, sent her pelting out of the garden and out of his life.

Now that he understood why, he wouldn't make the same mistakes, and he'd be damned certain he'd make it clear that marriage didn't mean the shackles she thought.

Carrying the ring over to the window, he held it between his thumb and forefinger while giving it a once-over with a critical eye. It was part of the jewels that went with his father's viscounty, but it would suit Evangeline well. The diamond solitaire, at least a half carat weight, lay surrounded by eight, round amethysts, all set in delicate silver filigree. It resembled a flower found when the weather was fair in the country at his father's estate. The deep purple flowers had grown in abundance in the meadows during the late spring and summer months.

Damnation. He should have kissed her with abandon in those meadows, kissed her until she couldn't remember her name, should have laid her down among the fragrant blooms and made love to her when he'd had the chance.

Why did I never show her how I felt? His mind reeled. Because that sort of thing simply wasn't done and such displays were frowned upon in their society. Because he'd been afraid of how much he would need to change upon marriage and perhaps become the very man she abhorred. Because in showing his desire, he would spook her, or so he'd thought at the time. Because he was the world's biggest idiot not to go after what he'd wanted most out of life—Evangeline. She always been his ideal, the woman he'd wanted above all others.

And he'd lost her for a myriad of reasons that had no bearing on the present or their future, for they would have one—together—this time around.

Again, he dropped his gaze to the ring. Even in the gloom, the jewels winked. Would she welcome a renewed courtship from him? By her own admission, she was skittish regarding the concept of marriage. Also from her own admission, she wanted heat in a relationship, and she wanted to be happy. All things he could provide for her, if he tried a different tack this time. What if, instead of the perfunctory and polite strolls or mindless conversations about nothing, he plied her with kisses and caress, used his words to thrill and seduce? If he put aside everything he wasn't to impress the woman

she wasn't pretending to be anymore, would he have different results?

I am willing to risk it, for in this instant that risk outweighs the reward. He would show her exactly that. They were a good fit for each other. It was a matter of convincing her and moving her past the panic. Logic wouldn't fly, so he would present his case on the emotional.

Yes. It just might triumph. He enfolded the ring into his hand and returned to his work area. And if things went well, he would propose again, but not in the traditional way. As he looked over the empty bonbon shells, his grin grew. He'd pop the ring into one of those shells and fill the interior with violet syrup, topping the whole thing with a sugared violet flower.

That would play to her romantic side, for he was sure she had one, if missing passion was part of her complaint. Couple that with a willingness to help her sell more underpinnings, and this revisitation of a courtship would have a much more pleasant outcome.

Consign her to the past? Foolish notion, that. She'd always been with him. Now he could correct what had gone wrong before.

"Theodore?" he called to his assistant and strode to the doorway.

"Yes, Mr. Winslow?" The eager young man with a shock of red hair severally parted in the middle of his head, faced him, wiping his hands on his Parisian-style black apron.

"See if you cannot locate the bottle of violet syrup we made a few weeks ago. I'm going to fashion a special, limited run of bonbons today. Perhaps, if successful, we'll expand into a whole flower collection—rose, orange blossom, lavender, honeysuckle, clover honey and so on. It is, after all, still spring, and once this dratted rainstorm blows itself out, customers will visit in force."

"Intriguing idea." The other man nodded. "It would be wildly lauded. Floral anything is a big draw at the moment."

"We can only hope the trend will have staying power." He returned the ring to his pocket. Seducing his lady fair would begin at the first available moment.



It wasn't until later that afternoon when Evangeline made an appearance in the emporium.

Jasper caught sight of her and his breath stalled. Though she wore the same shirtwaist and skirt she had on the previous night, in the day time and despite the gloom, she retained an air of expectation. A

certain light played about her face that sent a twinkle into her blue-green eyes. Her golden hair glimmered with red highlights, and the braids she'd wrapped around the back of her head resembled the finest, silken ropes.

When she smiled at Theodore and accepted the young man's offer of tea, Jasper nearly expired on the spot. He sucked in a lungful or two of oxygen while she made her way to the one available table in the far corner of the emporium.

Had she always been so beautiful? But his fascination of her went beyond her physical appearance. He continued to observe her while Theodore fussed over her table, laying out the standard sweets and individual trays of tea cakes and scones. She thanked him then engaged him in light conversation, and when he went away to fetch her tea, his cheeks blazed as scarlet as his hair. She didn't have to talk with his assistant, but she did. Where most patrons ignored the help, she singled him out for a chat.

Jasper grinned. Not suited for *ton* life indeed. She was as gracious as any duchess he could think of. He wiped his fingers on his Parisian-style apron and glanced about the emporium. The convivial hum of genteel conversation filled the cozy shop. With all six tables now occupied, one could almost forget the dreary weather outside. Perhaps that was what brought the patrons on this afternoon. Chocolate made a person happy.

"Theodore, the lady in the corner there. Do you know her?" He gestured with his chin at Evangeline once his assistant returned from delivering her teapot.

"I do not, Mr. Winslow." His grin was of a smitten youth. "She's a looker though."

"Indeed." Jasper stroked his chin. "She is, in fact, the woman who begged off from an engagement to me five years before."

The other man's eyes went round as saucers. "Truly?" His shop assistant knew the story of how the emporium came into being and what had spurred the inspiration behind the heartbreak bonbon collection.

"Yes." He nodded as confirmation. "Do you know what I'm going to do about that?" His mood elevated, Jasper removed a few soft caramels enrobed in silky dark chocolate from one of the specialty cases. On the top of each chocolate, a few pieces of flaked French sea salt rested. This would enhance the deep and bitter flavors of the sweets.

"Toss her out in the rain?" Doubt hung heavy on the question.

"No." Jasper gave an indulgent chuckle. He couldn't keep the news to himself any longer, and in an effort to make certain he wasn't a fool, he needed to tell someone of his intent. "I am going to seduce the

lady and ask her to marry me if all goes well.”

Theodore glanced at the small plate of chocolates in Jasper’s hand. “If I may say, Mr. Winslow, it’ll take a more than a few sweets to win back a lady such as her. She’s one of those sophisticated types, stubborn, the ones who have too much spirit for any man to tame.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong, my young friend.” He winked. “You see, I do not wish to tame her. I want to support her in whatever it is she decides to do. I adore that she isn’t like the rest.” That was exactly the key to handling this delicate situation. But first he needed to seduce her, show her a different side of him she didn’t expect but desired, and allay her fears regarding marriage. “Will you prepare one mug of drinking chocolate please? Bring it to her table in ten minutes.”

“I will, Mr. Winslow.” Theodore nodded. “Good luck, sir.”

“Thank you.” He didn’t need luck this time around, for the odds were already on his side. With confidence in his step and a lightness in his heart he hadn’t felt for a long time, Jasper made his way between the tables until he reached Evangeline’s. “Would you care for a bit of company?”

She glanced up, her eyes twinkling like the finest jewels. “That largely depends on the company.”

The wit and charm she exhibited was endearing. “How about me?”

“I suppose you would be acceptable... until someone else of consequence enters.” Evangeline made a show of looking about the small emporium before returning her regard to him. His chest tightened and he forgot to breathe again. “I apologize for not coming downstairs sooner. I slept rather later than I’d intended.” A wash of pink infused her cheeks. “Then I puttered and made use of the bathtub in your wash room.”

Dear God. His mind veered into a dark, shadowy place where her naked body lay nestled in hot, steaming water, perhaps interspersed with clouds of soap bubbles. Heat lanced through Jasper’s body and embedded itself into his groin. His member twitched to life. He quickly pulled out the free chair and sat before he embarrassed himself. “Uh, I’m glad, for I’d forgotten about giving you a tour before we retired.” He forced a swallow into his thick throat. “My home is your home for the length of your stay.”

“Thank you, but I plan to make arrangements to depart this evening.” She took up a teaspoon and stirred the amber liquid that hadn’t been unadulterated by cream or sugar while Jasper’s hopes crumbled around him and panic set in.

“Ah. Well, that is undoubtedly a good idea,” he agreed and leaned back in his chair as if what she did didn’t matter. “Wouldn’t want to give your proper and traditional family the wrong idea about what

you've been doing. No matter how innocent." He shrugged and glanced around the room where no one was currently paying them mind. "It's best to make certain they do not think you're *that* kind of woman," he couldn't help adding.

A frown marred the perfection of her lips. "What kind would that be?"

"The kind who would indulge in unsavory shenanigans." He forced a laugh and hoped it sounded as unconcerned as he wished. "Not that there is any sort of that nonsense at play here."

"I see." Was that a hint of disappointment in her tone? She took another sip of tea.

Jasper nodded. "Because there is not, what is the harm with staying until the storm passes? No sense rushing into horrid weather out of a misplaced sense of propriety." When she remained silent, he pushed the plate of caramels toward her. "These are for you."

"What are they?"

"Soft vanilla caramel enrobed in bittersweet chocolate. One of my most popular sellers." He leaned forward. "Chocolate is the next best thing to hanky panky a person can get." Wagging his eyebrows, he lowered his voice. "Or so I've been told. Some of my customers have mentioned they're almost... orgasmic."

If she thought to depart early without exploring the spark that had once more ignited between them, he'd make certain she was well and truly hooked like a fish. Only then could they begin again, with gusto this time.

Evangeline's eyes widened and she slowly lowered her teacup. "Is that so?"

He gestured toward the pieces. "Try them for yourself."

"I... I'm not in the mood for sweets." She pushed the plate back at him.

"Very well." Jasper tamped down the urge to roll his eyes. High-spirited and stubborn indeed. He moved his chair closer until his leg brushed hers and the outside of his thigh pressed into hers. "Chocolate is a favorite subject of mine, so let me share some of my knowledge. Throughout the history of Western civilization, chocolate has been reputed as used for aphrodisiacal purposes."

"Oh?" She laid her teacup into its saucer on the table.

"Yes." He pulled the plate toward them, took one of the sweets and held it between his thumb and forefinger. "I find it interesting that people have linked chocolate and sexual congress. For instance, the Mayans used the beans of the cacao pod as a way to pay for prostitutes in the early version of whorehouses." His voice faltered over the word. Discussing such things in front of a lady wasn't well done of him. As a distraction, he took a bite of the candy, his teeth

easily cutting through the chocolate shell and the soft caramel beneath. Sweet and redolent with vanilla and the bittersweet notes of the chocolate, the treat melted in his mouth as he chewed. Once he swallowed, he smiled. "I believe the whore's rate was eight beans per woman."

"That is an insult to women." She eyed the remaining chocolates but didn't make a move to take one.

"Oh, I heartily agree. Women are worth much more than that, nor should they be used in such a fashion." He lowered his voice. "Yet women, once aroused and primed for coitus are infinitely more valuable than that, especially if their hearts are engaged during such an intimate act. The men in the Mayan culture should have kept their females steeped in as many beans as they wanted. That's how valuable such women are."

Rosy color bloomed in her cheeks. "What would you know about females of low morals?"

"Honestly, not much. My luck with coaxing women into my bed has been quite low. The last time I succeeded was while I was in France learning my craft." He popped the remainder of the chocolate into his mouth, and around the bite, he said, "I met her at a low point, when all I could remember was you, and the chocolate work I'd attempted that day had failed." *Damnation*. What made him confess that? He shrugged and looked away, in the event disgust lit her eyes. "She was French and persuasive. She was also not interested in romance. Once the deed was done, she left, and I felt even worse." Finally, he found her gaze with his. Shock rolled through him when he encountered nothing except compassion. "Our liaison meant nothing, for she was not you. I was weak."

"Sometimes, the people we hold in special places of our hearts are not easily banished." The near-whisper warmed his cheek since they sat so close. "That being said, yours is an understandable story. I never expected you to become a monk." This time, she took a chocolate from the plate and began nibbling at its corners.

"Thank you." A sigh left his lips. What she said was as good as a benediction. He offered a slight grin. Best to continue his seduction attempt. "The powerful Aztec ruler, Montezuma, was one of the first virile lovers to tap into chocolate's alleged strengths." He arched an eyebrow and couldn't keep his gaze from her lips as she daintily ate the confection. "There are written accounts that he consumed as much as fifty cups of a cocoa elixir before heading off to service his harem."

At that juncture, Theodore delivered the mug of warmed drinking chocolate to their table. "Mr. Winslow wishes for you to try this."

"Thank you." Evangeline smiled at the young man and took the mug, focusing her attention on Jasper once more. She abandoned her

caramel. "Are you trying to use chocolate's effects on me?" Suspicion warred with amusement in her eyes.

"No. I merely wanted you to try our version of this drink. It's most pleasing." He didn't need chocolate to do the job that his words would. As she sipped the rich, fragrant drink, he moved his leg so that it caressed hers. Heat jumped between them. A wash of pink color stained her cheeks. "Chocolate, especially the melted variety, is pleasurable on the tongue and the senses. It envelopes a person, warms them throughout the body, fires the brain with feelings of goodwill and..."

"And?" Anticipation flooded her voice as she hung on his words.

"It puts them in mind of romance and other... pleasures one can find when one is somewhat undressed." He left it at that. At least her mind would be primed.

"Ah." She sipped from the mug and a sigh escaped her once she tasted the drinking chocolate. "This is marvelous. So velvety."

"Yes," he fairly purred. "Imagine chocolate like the finest silk. Feel the coolness of the soft fabric as it caresses your skin." Ever so briefly he touched her hand. She didn't wear gloves this afternoon, no doubt due to the unorthodox way she'd entered the emporium. "Imagine that rich and velvety warmth if one were to perhaps drizzle the concoction over a lover's sensitive skin." Jasper took her free hand in his. He drew circles on her palm, grinning when she gave into a shiver. He lowered his voice, being sure to infuse suggestion into that whisper. Her eyes drifted closed. "Imagine your lover licking that thick, sweet, melted chocolate from the pale slope of your breast, perhaps swirling his tongue around and around your nipple, teasing that stiff peak and coaxing a moan from your perfect lips. He might then drizzle a rich, forbidden path of the melted goodness down your body then, as a gentleman, he would lick your skin clean."

"Oh my." She drew in a shuddering breath as her fingers gripped the mug's handle tighter. Her knuckles whitened. Her eyes popped open. "What then?"

He couldn't contain his grin. How surprising was her appetite for play, at least through her imagination? Would she be so curious if it were to truly happen?

After glancing about to remain certain no one paid them attention, he continued his verbal seduction. "That lucky man who will have you naked and willing beneath him might employ an artist's brush to liquid chocolate. He might paint a heart upon your navel, perhaps write endearments along your belly simply for the mere reward of licking and sucking away his handiwork."

Her hand shook. A bit of the drinking chocolate sloshed over the mug's rim and she quickly set the cup down. "What would he do

then?" The breathlessness of her tone pleased him.

Ah, his darling Evie was hooked. How easy it was this time around now the keys to her heart had been handed to him. "Perhaps he would have another go, or perhaps he would abandon his chocolate artistry in order to kiss you senseless. Once you were properly aroused, he would once more proceed to explore every inch of your skin with tongue and teeth until you begged him to send you flying."

"Who is this knowledgeable lover?"

"I would have no idea, for you have kept men at arm's length." Would that they were not in a public place. He desperately wished to kiss those slightly parted lips. "Only you can choose to let a man so close, and it won't be such a terrible experience as you fear."

Please choose me. The trouble with using words to seduce a woman was the speaker couldn't help but find himself caught up in the same scenario. Jasper was obliged to shift his position on the chair as his shaft hardened and pressed against the front of his trousers.

Another shuddering sigh issued from her. "Is chocolate always this sensual?" Her pupils were dilated, a sure sign of arousal.

"Not always. Most people don't wish to explore that side of it. To them, sweets are merely sweets and they cannot imagine anything else. Perhaps life has beaten them down until they have no more curiosity or adventure." He moved his fleeting caress upward and brushed the pad of his thumb over the inside of her wrist, her pulse point. "Which sort of woman are you, Evangeline?"

She came back to herself with a tiny shake of her head. Her eyes widened, the desire fading, and she disengaged her hand from his. "I... I am not sure."

"A pity, that." Jasper scraped his chair over the gleaming tiled floor and then he stood. "Well, I should return to work, so I'll leave you to your tea." He'd laid the groundwork. The next overture would be hers.

"Jasper?" The whispered word was barely discernable over the din in the emporium.

"Yes?"

"Should I decide to remain for one night more, would you extend your invitation?" Her cheeks blazed with high color.

All of his willpower went into not whooping in victory. Instead, he kept his face an impassive mask. "Absolutely, Miss Bradenwilde. Do let me know what you've decided. I shall be around the shop."

Then he left her company with a new bounce in his step. She still cared for him, he could feel it, and the next phase of seduction would be exciting, but what would happen once the horrible stint of weather passed?

Chapter 6

The rain hadn't let up by dinner.

This time, instead of taking a late tea in the emporium, Evangeline consented to sharing an actual meal with Jasper in his apartment, where he did have a dining room with a table that surprisingly sat eight people. Located on the second floor—the bedroom and small parlor on the third—the level also featured a decent-sized drawing room complete with a piano, as well as a kitchen and a tiny powder room.

How interesting his bachelor quarters were so decadent that he could entertain should he so desire. The kitchen, as she'd discovered once he'd closed the shop and they'd retired to his living area, was ruled by a housekeeper, who visited the bachelor abode three times a week. Today, she left him a meal of roast beef, sautéed peas and carrots, and creamed potatoes.

As she glanced about the dining room and took in the gilt-framed paintings of water-colored landscapes, the crystal chandelier above the gleaming cherrywood dining table and the shining silverware, she couldn't help wondering if he'd funded all of these lavish touches or if his had family contributed.

She stole a glance at him as he chased a few peas around his plate, trying in vain to encourage them onto his fork. His suggestive words of earlier still echoed in her ears. When he'd spoken them, did he imagine himself as her lover? Did he wish to do such things to her, and use melted chocolate during intimacies? Had he said those things from experience? Good God, had he employed his confections on another? Her eyes widened. Perhaps, but it was also possible the woman he'd told her of before, the lady in France, had taught him those same things.

The more she ruminated, the more a twinge of jealousy speared through her. It should have been her to lay with him in twisted sheets and experience the heated press of their bodies together. But that moment had passed due to her own foolishness.

Yet, a shiver of need shot down her spine. Such an inconvenience,

reality. Easily rectified in one's thoughts, where everything was as it should be. No longer did she see him seated across the table from her. In her mind's eye, she pretended she stood at the side of his bed while he lounged upon it, stark naked. In her hand, she held a wooden spoon. Decadent, melted chocolate dribbled from the utensil onto his rampant and ready manhood. Her mouth watered, and in her fantasy, she tossed away the spoon while lowering her head, tongue ready to lick the sweetness from his—

"Did you enjoy your meal?" The low tenor of his voice interrupted her daydream.

Hellfire and damnation! Never say that he could read her mind. Did pleasuring a man with one's mouth constitute a meal? Perhaps in some ways it could. And where in heaven's name had those thoughts sprung from in the first place? Never in her life had she put her mouth—or any other part of her—upon a man's shaft. How scandalous she'd become in recent days. Yet disappointment crashed over her for the dashed musings that had no satisfying dénouement. The heat in her cheeks remained. "I beg your pardon?" So lost in thought, she had no idea of what he'd said or what he was talking about. "I mean, I wasn't attending—"

"Woolgathering during dinner, Evangeline?"

"Yes, forgive me." She shook her head. "I was otherwise occupied elsewhere." A throb of desire swept through her core. Never had she experienced such a reaction for him. This was Jasper Winslow, of all people! The man who couldn't summon an ounce of passion if his life had depended upon it, yet here she was, nearly panting after him and having inappropriate thoughts about him when he clearly belonged in her past.

Didn't he?

"From all accounts, that somewhere else must have been devilishly fun. Pining after a man?"

"No, I..." Still bewildered and beset with vestiges of her wild imaginings, Evangeline floundered. She twisted her napkin between her hands, thankful they were on her lap and hidden from his view.

He wiped his lips with a linen napkin and then tossed it onto his now-empty plate. "I must say, it makes me a jot jealous that I cannot compete with a daydream, for by that telltale blush on your cheeks, the man you wool-gathered about must have been impressive. Am I not an interesting companion?"

Drat and double drat. Why did he have to read her so well, and what the deuce happened to her carefully cultivated mask of coolness that kept her safe from flirtations? "You are. It is just that my mind wandered and I..." She trailed to an awkward halt. *Well, I cannot very well tell him I was imagining him naked, can I?* Stuff and nonsense, that.

He and she were no longer together. She had no right to think about him, *sans* clothing or otherwise.

"I hope the daydream was worthwhile." One of his eyebrows arched with a hint of suggestion, which once more recalled her to his scandalous conversation that afternoon. "Perhaps such a thing might come true."

She glanced sharply at him with held breath. Of course there was no way he could possibly know what she thought about. He was not a mystic, nor did he possess magical abilities. Unless his skill with chocolate and confections counted. That brought her thoughts back around to the business of using the melted sweet during intimacy, and once more her cheeks fired. "I rather doubt it will." It couldn't. Not now. Not ever. There could be no hanky panky as he called it, for that would urge his gentlemanly soul to make an offer for her. Despite his confession to the brief affair in Paris, Jasper wasn't a rogue. Regardless of his recent forays into passionate talk or scandalous whispers, he was the proper sort of man she had an abject fear of. And marriage based on being compromised, even if the woman supported such an act, was something she needed to avoid as if her life depended upon it.

Freedom was more valuable than romance.

Evangeline sighed and did the unthinkable, something her mother would chastise her about or utter a shocked gasp. She plopped an elbow on the tabletop and rested her chin her hand. Why was life so complicated?

The sound of his softly cleared throat yanked her back to the moment. "If your mind is conflicted, perhaps talking about what is bothering you will help you through it."

Admit to him that she'd conducted lascivious thoughts about him? Not bloody likely. "It is of no consequence." She waved her free hand, napkin and all. "Forgive me. Perhaps it's the rain that's discomfiting me."

"Perhaps." His silver-gray eyes twinkled as if something had amused him. That tiny bit of mirth pulled her in, and she would happily drown if only she would release her control. "In an effort to change the subject?" When she nodded, he continued, "I've been meaning to ask you since you landed in my care last night, but what is in the trunk? Since I haven't brought it upstairs yet and you haven't asked for it, can I assume the contents are not important to your day to day living?"

And yet, this new conversation was no less uncomfortable. She straightened her posture, and throwing her napkin onto the table, she nodded. "Uh, there is a spare gown inside."

The grin that curved his lips had the breath stalling in her throat.

Had he always been so charming? “Is that all? Somehow I do not think a gown and perhaps matching slippers would take up so much space or be as valuable as you claimed upon arrival.”

She ignored a new wash of heat that slapped her cheeks. Why must he bring out such confusion in her? “There are other things in the trunk.”

“Such as?” He rubbed his chin while he regarded her with speculation.

Had he always been so inquisitive? Evangeline worried her bottom lip with her teeth. What was the harm in revealing all? She’d already told him of her occupation. This additional information wouldn’t matter. “Since you must know, the trunk contains my samples. Pieces that are current. I show my clients the corsets, petticoats, combinations. The trunk travels with me wherever I go.”

“Is that so?” A gleam jumped into his eyes, and she didn’t trust it. “Then, by all means, we must retrieve that trunk.” He launched to his feet and then held out a hand to her. “Will you accompany me?”

“I don’t see why it is necessary to bring up the trunk.” Yet she slipped her fingers into his palm. Warmth ebbed up her arm from the point of contact, and as he pulled her into a standing position, she stifled a sigh. She had missed the niceties being with a gentleman afforded a lady. When he didn’t release her hand, her mind jogged to earlier in the afternoon when he’d caressed her palm. Renewed shivers skated over her skin and made her extremely aware of him as a man.

“I’m suddenly gripped with a desire to see the contents of that trunk, my dear.” He tugged her toward the dining room door. “For what else shall we do this evening?”



THE knowledge that Evangeline kept a trunk full of underclothes shouldn’t have aroused him as much as it did. Jasper couldn’t explain why. He only knew that he needed to have a glimpse at those unmentionables.

Then he slowed in his intent to pull her through his townhouse, for her hand tucked into his was as enthralling as the prospect of having a look at a corset. She willingly let him touch her, hold her—albeit her hand. He glanced at their entwined fingers and moved his gaze upward until it encountered hers. This was how they should move through life: hand in hand. Heat climbed the back of his neck. What

happened if this seduction didn't bring the results he desired?

I shall puzzle that out when the proper time comes.

"Having second thoughts, Jasper?" The question, low-pitched and amused, brought him back to the task before him.

Did she mean now or his plan to entice her into an engagement? He shook his head. Of course she meant now. She couldn't read thoughts. Releasing her hand, he tugged on his suddenly too-tight collar. "Second thoughts? Not even close." He proceeded to the stairwell and plunged down the first flight. "I have an extremely clear mental image of what I want to accomplish," he continued over his shoulder. "And very little time in which to put my plans into motion."

The firm *tap-tap* of her heels on the wooden stairs behind him confirmed she followed. "What plans would those be?"

Jasper managed to elude her question until they reached the door that separated his living quarters from the shop space. "Let us say it's rather vague at this point." He unlocked and then pulled open the door, which gave way with a slight creak of the hinges. "But I am unapologetically optimistic."

"You always were that." She trailed him into the shop. The trunk waited in the shadows, in the same spot that it had since he'd rescued her from the empty train platform. "It was one of the things I admired about you, that optimism. Inspiring, really."

"Do you not still admire that about me?" His quiet question echoed loud in the silent shop. As she pondered the inquiry, he scuttled around to the other side of the trunk.

"I do," she agreed with equally whispered tones. "The ability to see the positive in any situation despite the setbacks is wonderful." A frown turned down the corners of her mouth, and he was seized by the urge to kiss away whatever thoughts caused it. "I have never been able to live life quite like that. Instead, I let the negative things that impact me fester about my mind until I cannot look past that cloud."

"It is a trick you should actively train your brain to reverse."

"Somehow, I suspect one needs a friend around them when one begins such a practice." A wistful note crept into her voice and her eyes went soft with faraway memories.

"I could be that friend, Evie."

Her lips quivered and then she glanced away, hiding her expression. "Perhaps if we did not already share a history, for there is nothing left between us except memories."

Such gammon that was. She lied to herself and to him, but he didn't correct her erroneous statement. He leaned down and grabbed the handle of the trunk. "At the present time, I require your assistance with this." If at all possible, he'd be the man who would help her find the sunny side of every situation. "Everything else we can—will—

discuss at a later time.” As long as the rain continued to fall.

He’d never hoped so hard for a continuation of the dreary, wet London weather more than he did in this moment, for it was the one thing keeping her with him.

“I do not know what there is to talk about.” When he still didn’t answer but merely stared at the trunk, she sighed. “Very well.” She took up the other handle and then she frowned again. “Do you mean that I should go backward up the stairs?”

“If that is what you wish.” He smirked. “No doubt that feat would be challenging for a lady in skirts though.”

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. “If you can do it, so can I.” Quickly, she released the trunk handle in favor of gathering the front hem of her skirts. She tucked it into her belt, which put her stocking-clad legs on full display from the knee downward. Without so much as a sound, she did the same for the back skirting. Once done, she gripped the trunk’s handle and tugged, her eyebrows raised in question. “Shall we?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned like a schoolboy having his first peek of a female’s limbs. But in his defense, she really did have trim, attractive ankles. And supple calves he could think of nothing else better to do than slide his fingertips along. He swallowed hard as they tackled the stairs with the trunk between them. Her knees were adorable and practically begged him to press a kiss onto each one, or ease them apart in the search of infinitely more scandalous body parts.

Oh God. Too much more of those thoughts and he’d be lost without hope of returning.

“Are you quite all right? It appears you are experiencing breathing troubles,” she questioned, a hefty dose of amusement in her voice.

Jasper cleared his throat. “Fine. Never better, actually.” Would the stairs never end? Finally, they entered his apartments. “Shall we leave the trunk in the entryway?”

“No.” Her smile hinted of teasing. “I simply must have it upstairs, for I plan to utilize the gown on the morrow once I depart, should the precipitation cease.”

That grin sent heat sailing into places it had no business going for the moment. He tamped down his reaction. “Of course.” Buggar it. If there was a God in heaven, the rain wouldn’t stop and Evangeline wouldn’t go anywhere. After they’d spent more time together talking and perhaps indulging in a kiss or two, she’d discover her natural place was by his side. The woman merely needed to set aside her inhibitions, cease building the wall around her heart that kept people out and her protected from fear, and let herself think of what might go in her favor while looking at the future instead of what she assumed would go wrong. Then, and only then could they both move forward.

Together. "Onward, then."

The next flight of stairs was accomplished without incident, and once they'd placed the trunk inside the bedroom, Jasper stood upright with a hand to the small of his back.

"Regarding your business..."

"Yes?" She eyed him with suspicion as she freed her hems from her belt.

Cold disappointment crashed through him when the sweep of her skirts covered those delectable lower appendages. He shoved it away. Soon he would entice her into his arms, but he just needed to convince her, perhaps challenge her into moving out on that limb, show her that by clinging to her reservations, she was being as traditional as her mother. "Do you put on the corsets you intend for your clients to buy?"

Perhaps that was the gimmick her sales desperately needed.

"Are you daft?" She gawked at him with her kissable lips slightly parted, her hands propped on her lush, rounded hips. "What sort of woman do you take me for?" Shocked outrage rang in her question.

"The sort of woman who is willing to take chances. Chances that will make her dreams become reality." He couldn't help his grin. Her astonishment amused him and he laughed. It was so easy around Evangeline to find that lightness of spirit he'd missed these past several years. "Besides, you should. How else can your future clients see the exact fit of these garments unless you use yourself as a model?" Slowly, he moved his gaze up and down her body. Another wave of heat slid through him. "You have the perfect figure for it." Before he could do something stupid, like wrap his arms around her or explore those enticing curves with his fingers, he clasped his hands behind his back.

"Oh, do stop, Jasper." She waved away his compliment while pink bloomed on her cheeks. "I don't have that kind of courage."

"I can assist with building it." He propped a foot on the trunk and then leaned forward with an arm on his knee. "You could practice modeling the clothes for me." Making a great show of glancing around the area, he moved away from the trunk and spread his arms wide. "There is no one here."

Her eyes rounded. "Except you. A male. And one with whom I share a history."

"Don't think of it like that." Yes, this was just the thing to break her out of her self-imposed prison where emotions couldn't reach her heart.

He nodded in the event she didn't understand. "You trust me, don't you?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Unless you have devilry in mind."

"I am offended you could believe that of me." He assumed an expression of shock and pressed a hand to his heart with an injured air. "After all, didn't you say I was..." He lifted his eyes to consult the ceiling, pretending to think. "...traditional, too proper and somewhat boring?" When he looked her way, he held his glee in check as her embarrassment deepened. "What harm or scandal could I possibly do?"

"I'm not certain this is a good idea." She glanced at the trunk and then at him. "Such things are rather personal."

No, not a good idea, but an ingenious one. "We were once friends, were we not?"

"Yes, I suppose." She drew out the words. "Close friends, friends who almost..." Her words broke off, and he frowned. Was that a sob she tamped down?

"Indeed." He would wager a quarter of his yearly salary that she still cared for him. "I am willing to help you in this endeavor. For the sake of your business, of course," he added in a rush.

"Somehow, I find it difficult to believe you are true of heart in this matter."

"Clever girl to be wary." Evangeline would probably give him a tongue lashing and a right proper dressing down once she discovered his ultimate intent, but he hoped the eventual outcome of his gambit would temper her reaction. "If you can model those underclothes in front of me, explain to a male how superior they are above manufactured items, then there is nothing you cannot accomplish in front of prospective, female clients bent on cattiness."

Silence brewed between them for long moments, broken only by the howl of the wind and the lash of the rain against the windows.

To drive home the point, he added, "Where's the woman who hiked up her skirts to help haul this trunk up here? You certainly had no qualms about uncovering your ankles and knees in front of me. There is no difference with my request."

Finally, she sighed. "Now I know why you are so successful with your confectionary business."

"Why?"

"If you can convince a woman to strip down to her underclothes and then parade about in front of you explaining why they're worthy, selling a customer a box of chocolate bonbons must be child's play." She pressed her hands to her cheeks.

Jasper couldn't help his grin. "Does that mean you'll do it?"

She nodded but her eyes twinkled, more blue than green now. "But you must swear on your life you won't tell a soul. I do have a reputation to think of."

"Upon my honor, I will never speak of what occurs here tonight."

He gave her a bow from the waist, and when he straightened, he smiled, feeling much like the Cheshire cat from that much-loved novel. “Shall I assist you with hooks and buttons?”

Her eyes widened. Emotion lit those jeweled depths, so fleeting he couldn’t read it, but she shook her head. “The gown is one I can manipulate on my own, as is one of the corsets I intend to show, so chivalry won’t be needed.”

The statement was true enough. There was nothing close to chivalry on his mind just now as excitement played his spine. “Very well. I shall go downstairs and make tea to give you the privacy you’ll require for changing.”

As if the conversation’s outcome didn’t matter, he headed down the staircase, not caring if he made the tea. It was merely an excuse, and to let her come to terms with the choice she’d made. He was either the biggest idiot London had ever seen or would be lauded—in his private circle of friends if he should choose to share the details—as a genius when it came to romance.

At the moment, that opinion could swing either way.

Chapter 7

W*hat have I done?*

Well, more to the point, what was she about to do? Evangeline stared down the dimly lit staircase where Jasper had vanished. Anxiety twisted her insides. It was one thing to have exposed ankles and knees to him, but quite another to shed her clothes down to the very underpinnings she attempted to peddle in the hopes of maintaining her independence.

And in front of the man she ran away from five years ago, no less.

“Oh, this worrying is pointless,” she muttered, and opening the trunk, she pawed through the lace, satin and fine cotton until she came to the corset she wanted. “It is Jasper, after all.” They were friends, and he wasn’t a rogue. He wouldn’t molest her and then send her on her way with a ruined reputation.

With corset in hand, she scurried into his bedroom and shut the door behind her. Yet, there was a change about him. No longer was he the proper gentleman she remembered. In that man’s place was Jasper Winslow, the man with a sense of humor and an air of wicked indulgence. She shivered as she began the task of removing her skirt and shirtwaist. Where she used to know exactly what the man five years ago would do, she was in the dark about what this Jasper might attempt.

Yet she’d consented to appear before him clad in her corset and underclothes.

Her hands shook. Her chest tightened with nerves. The corset she wore fell to her nimble fingers, as did her two petticoats, her half-boots, her stockings and the bustle cage. A shiver coursed down her spine, whether from the chill in the air or what she was about to do, she couldn’t say.

“What the devil was I thinking?”

She surveyed the small pile of discarded clothing around her feet with dismay. This wasn’t right. Neither was it proper. A woman of good morals would never show a man she wasn’t married to her underclothes. She could almost hear her mother’s admonishment echo

about her mind.

Then she straightened her spine. "I am not her." The confident whisper sounded overly loud in the quiet room. "By my very occupation, I have proven myself more daring and innovative than she has ever been."

Perhaps Jasper had been correct after all. She was a woman of courage... if she would but let herself follow through with that bravery. If this didn't help bolster her confidence, she would have no choice but to return home, disgraced and defeated, and let her mother resume her matchmaking process. That wasn't what she wanted for her life because that would mean she would have to truly leave Jasper in her past, and that everything between them would be over.

But then, he already had a good life here. There was no place for her; they couldn't go back, for they weren't those people anymore, even if there was a flicker of hope—

"Evangeline?" His voice sounded on the other side of the door. A soft knock landed on the panel immediately after. "I've brought tea up. Are you ready?"

"Almost."

With more haste than attention to detail, she donned the corset she'd selected. Her fingers slipped over the pink French sateen as if it were water as she fitted the garment to her body. She fumbled with the tiny hooks and their loops. Even though the fastenings went down the front of the item, she struggled, more frustrated with nerves than of her inability to work the hardware. Finally, the last hook was fitted and she smoothed her hands along the corset. The pleating provided visual interest and kept the eye looking vertically, which helped with the illusion of appearing thin for her chubbier clients. Black lace trim along the bodice, combined with black satin ribbons made the piece eye-popping and gave the wearer a bit of a naughty secret beneath their everyday dresses and shirtwaists.

"I'm coming out now. Please be kind."

Aware her voluptuous curves were enhanced by the French-designed corset, she again pondered whether this looming stint at exhibitionism was a good idea. At least she still wore the camisole and drawers beneath to further hide her form. "Stop it, Evangeline. Find your bravado and make it stick," she fiercely whispered to herself. How would Jasper react? Even though they were no longer together and he hadn't indicated that he wished for circumstances to change, she had the girlish thought that she wanted to render him speechless. "You are not trying to impress him, remember. You are trying to learn how to sell more corsets." *Right, he is part of my past.*

Then she stepped around the discarded clothing and put a hand on the doorknob. Her heartbeat raced through her veins. The muscles of

her stomach clenched. Every nerve in her body seemed strung too tight. In some ways, she was more horribly exposed than merely showing off the undergarments. Vulnerability was one thing she didn't do well, and with nothing to hide behind—literally and figuratively—terror lurked in the pockets of her soul. Restless energy zipped from her toes to the ends of her hair. Would she lose her courage and hide herself away behind his bedroom door? It was time to find out.

Whatever she thought would happen the moment she emerged from the bedroom, crossed the hall and entered the parlor, it flew right out of her head when he clambered to his feet. The linen napkin slipped off his lap and onto the floor, unheeded. His lips formed an “O” of surprise, his eyes darkening to the color of rain-swollen clouds over the sea.

And still he said nothing. The void of silence grew more charged with tension until she could stand it no longer. “Well?” She propped her hands on her hips, and he followed the action, his gaze sweeping along the nip of her waist. “Do you like the sample or not?”

“I don't know what to say.” His lips made words that he didn't utter. Instead, he simply stared, gestured once at her with a hand and then finally cleared his throat. “The corset is incredible.” He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. “You are beautiful in it.” He dropped his voice. “One could argue it is your curves that give the garment life.”

Evangeline smiled. She couldn't have asked for a better reaction. “You were always one for pretty words.”

“This time they're not merely complimentary.” He rubbed his chin. “It's nothing but truth.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, thank you. I knew this was a good piece to show.” Still beset with nerves, she wetted her lips and cast a glance over her shoulder. “I should change.”

“No.” Jasper, apparently regaining his senses, came around the table and approached her. “Not yet. If it is all the same to you, I'd like to examine the corset to fully appreciate its lines.”

Strange request, but she nodded. The closer he approached, the faster her breathing came. Why? She'd never been nervous around him before. Not in the two years they'd courted had his presence sent gooseflesh racing along her arms or tingles sparking at the base of her spine. “How many, uh, women have you inspected corsets upon?”

“Not as many as you probably want to believe.” He reached out a hand, and when he traced the lace at her bodice, his fingers shook, and that slight tell tugged at her heart. “The trim is a nice touch.”

“Yes. When we requested these made, we didn't wish to forego fripperies even though no one would see the underclothes.” She barely forced the words past a tight throat. “I fully believe that if a woman

wears pretty things as her foundation, she will find the confidence she needs to face whatever occurs throughout the day.”

His gaze never left hers. “Except, why do you not practice that same philosophy?”

“I beg your pardon?” The awareness of him grew overwhelming. She couldn’t think straight while he stood there, so close with his hands now resting lightly on her hips. No longer did his interest fall to the corset.

“Where has your confidence in yourself and your abilities gone in recent years, Evie?” he asked in a whisper, his warm breath skating across her cheek. “The young woman you used to be had stars in her eyes and steel in her veins.” As he held her gaze, the tension between them hummed into being. “While I’ll admit I was hurt when you went off chasing your dreams and left me, I am sad that now you’ve closed yourself off from everyone and let your dreams float down the road.” His fingers tightened on her hips as his eyes held the wicked twinkle that signaled mischief was imminent. “Will you chase them or let them slip away?”

She laid her palms on his chest with the determination to push him from her. He was entirely too close for her peace of mind, yet his words rankled. “I am doing the best I can at living my dreams.”

“Are you?” Jasper moved a hand from her hips to cup her cheek. He brushed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb, the action as fleeting as the touch of a butterfly wing. “Truly and without reservation, or are you doing an excellent job of hiding from them?”

Did he refer to her business undertakings or what had occurred between him and her? Evangeline had no time to ponder, for no sooner had the words faded than he kissed her. Yet it was more than that. The press of his lips against hers wasn’t urgent, but neither was it the perfunctory pecks he used to give her. She curled one hand into his lapel as her knees wobbled. *This* was the Jasper Winslow she’d known years before? Surprise kept her eyes open. He hadn’t closed his either and watched her while their connection remained unbroken.

Gently and so tender as if a sudden movement would startle her, he slipped his hand to the back of her head and cradled her skull, pulling her closer with the veriest tug. The hand at her hip maneuvered around to rest at the small of her back and secured her against him. Not tight enough that she couldn’t escape if she wanted to.

That was the question. Did she wish to run? Confusion clouded her mind as she tried to decide. Everything was so... muddled now.

And still he looked at her, questions deep in those stormy gray depths. “Shall I continue, Evangeline?” His barely-there inquiry caused his lips to stroke hers and left tickling sensations behind.

Her heart squeezed that he was willing to wait for her permission. "I..." She slid her other hand up his chest to curl around his nape. This intimate meeting was so different than anything she'd experienced with him before that curiosity wouldn't let her alone. "Please."

Jasper didn't waste time. He claimed her lips and moved along them in a languorous search, for what, she couldn't say. The silken glide of his tongue's tip loosed a host of tremors along her spine, and when she gasped at the unexpected pleasure, he pushed that organ inside her mouth. Evangeline met him and a duel ensued, full of silk and satin heat.

It was delightful and magical all at once.

When he pulled away and broke the embrace, she groaned in disappointment. Why did he stop when she needed so much more from him? "Did I not have the correct deportment or style such an embrace requires?" She'd only kissed like that once before with her previous fiancé, and those kisses had been enjoyable, of course, and had introduced her to the more intense side of courtship and romance. But he hadn't drawn such heat from her or cause blatant desire to bloom and grow low in her belly like Jasper did.

"You were everything perfect."

"Then why did you stop?" She took a deep breath, hoping to regulate her breathing.

His grin was decidedly lopsided. "Because if we don't, there is every possibility that kiss will lead to other, more satisfying, endeavors."

"Oh." Her eyes widened and heat slapped her cheeks. She wetted her lips. The sweet taste of sugar he must have added to his tea lingered on her palate. "Do you not, uh, wish to do... *that*... with me?" Embarrassment burned through her face at her audacity to ask such a question.

"Ah, my dear." Jasper shoved a hand into his hair, leaving the dark strands in furrowed rows. "That is neither here nor there, don't you think?" He turned away and headed back to the sofa he'd abandoned when she'd entered the parlor. "You don't feel there is anything between us now. If I were to act on my desire, it would be taking an advantage of you where I have no right, and after everything, I am a gentleman."

Her heart, that once-fortified organ she'd hidden from everyone for fear of being hurt, cracked out of its shell and a piece flew into his keeping. "I..." His words echoed in her mind. ...*you don't feel there is anything between us*... Did that mean he did? She cleared her throat as slow-moving panic climbed her throat. "I should probably dress for sleep." This was no good, this battle between being unfulfilled and

terrified he'd push for a future, but what was the lesser of two evils: falling for him again or throwing caution to the wind and giving life to her curiosity and how exactly he would take advantage? Then her thoughts swung the other way. A relationship with any man right now would hinder her chance of finding freedom. Confusion raged within her. Why did this complication not make itself known until she'd reconnected with him on that dratted train platform?

Jasper reached the sofa and then faced her. His eyes were no less intense than they ever were and that knowing glint cut into her musings. "Do you require assistance in removing the corset?"

"Actually, I do not. This one fastens..." She sucked in a breath and didn't tell him the hooks were on the front and easy for her to manipulate. If he didn't remember, she wouldn't enlighten him. "You still wish to help in such a task?" Her body vibrated with anticipation to feel his touch once more. Perhaps she was more daring than she'd thought, for she couldn't wait to have him close, regardless of the fact her convoluted thoughts centered on him.

"Very much." The words, so low-pitched, were almost lost to the sound of the steady rain against the windows. "I'm strong enough to withstand your siren's song."

Evangeline's jaw dropped. He thought she had that sort of allure? "All right." How much trouble could they find then? After all, the bedroom and its bed were steps away, and they weren't moving toward them. Not that she would ever think to lead him on. She came around one of the sofas with tentative steps. "But the other corset is even more risqué than this one. It's cut lower and shows more—"

"Hush." Jasper joined her in front of one of the chairs. "Don't tempt me more than you already have." He dropped his hands upon her shoulders. "Turn."

She gave into a smile as she did his bidding. How long would it take him to discover the truth? She didn't care. Just knowing he had to battle desire sent curls of pleasure unfurling in her belly. There was a certain feminine satisfaction in that. "No doubt you've been tempted by a woman during the years we've been apart." Yet one part of her hoped he hadn't played the rogue. "Someone like me can easily be forgotten."

"Don't underestimate your worth." His breath warmed her nape. "Aside from the woman in Paris, I have been celibate. My attention has mostly been on my work. After you..." A long pause followed the broken admission. "Well, nevermind." He slid his hands up and down the back of the corset before resting them on her hips. "Where are the hooks?"

"On the front." She shot what she hoped was a cheeky grin over her shoulder, but the heat imparted from his hold distracted her. Her

pulse accelerated and she took a few shallow breaths. Did he still harbor feelings for her? *Oh, dear Lord, this is becoming too murky.* “Shall I turn around again?”

“That would be helpful.” When she did so, he set to work on the first few hooks, starting at the top, hidden by folds of fabric. “While we’re on the subject of corsets, it is not the cut of the garment or the trim that makes it so enticing for a man.”

As the hooks fell before his nimble fingers, Evangeline’s skin warmed. He was so close but yet so far. Manipulating the fastenings on a corset was not the same as being caressed. “What does, then?”

“The woman wearing it.” The corset opened. It fell at their feet with a soft *thud*. “No matter what she dons, her smile, the twinkle in her eyes, the way her lips curve with a smile, the sound of her laughter are what captivates a man.” He set his hands at her hips and slid them upward to her waist. “The very shape of her will always be her most beautiful features.”

She forced a swallow into her suddenly tight throat. “What are you trying to tell me, Jasper?” The heat from his skin seeped through the thin cotton of her camisole. Slowly, oh so slowly, he edged his hands upward until he brushed the curve of her breasts. “I cannot bear this talking in riddles.” Did he think those things about her?

“When you demonstrate how your corsets look for your clients, spin them a tale, make them see the romance attached to such a garment.”

Cold disappointment crashed down her spine. Obviously, he did not. Those words were part and parcel of a spiel for the sell. “I will try.” She dropped her gaze and concentrated on the knot of his thin black cravat. “I appreciate your insight.”

“I meant those words for you, too, Evie.” He fitted a finger beneath her chin and raised her head until their gazes met. Sincerity shone in his gray depths. “Don’t devalue yourself based on what you wish your life was like. You have much to give the world yet. Enjoy what your life is now.”

Tears sprang into her eyes. Why couldn’t he have said such meaningful things years ago when she could have used his support the most? Guilt twisted in her gut. Of course, he wouldn’t have. She’d broken off their association; she’d made certain they could never come back together. “Thank you.” On impulse, she threw her arms about his shoulders and hugged him. “I have missed you.” That, at least, was the truth. “I’m glad for your friendship... after everything.”

He played his hands up and down her back. Electric energy followed in his wake. “I live to serve.”

The longer they remained locked in the embrace, the more her desire for him grew. Her nipples hardened, and every tiny movement

she made caused them to rasp against the lace on her camisole. Need streaked through her, pooling between her thighs. She stifled a moan. Evangeline pulled away so she could peer into his face. "Will you kiss me again?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said in a fair imitation of what she'd said to him earlier and he retreated a couple of steps until the backs of his knees hit the chair.

"Why?"

"Honestly?"

"Since we cleared all misunderstandings between us, honesty is best."

Jasper nodded. He brushed his knuckles over one of her taut nipples and grinned when she gasped. "I am afraid that if I touch you, kiss you again, I won't be able to control my impulses. I want you to leave my home with your reputation intact."

Hope lifted her heart. And then a wicked streak gripped her. "I am a woman grown and have a mind of my own." Evangeline planted a hand against his chest and gave him a firm shove. He tumbled ungracefully into the chair. "What if I said I don't care as much for my reputation as I once did?" Giving into impulse, she slid onto his lap, and daring to test her wings, she straddled him. "Perhaps I merely need to take what I want."

For the moment, she ignored her ambitions and her wont for independence. Right now, there was only him, for she highly doubted she could have both.

Chapter 8

I am in serious trouble.

What Jasper had hoped was a gambit to make Evangeline see the confidence she already had inside of her had changed into his own seduction.

“What do you mean by this?” His voice cracked on the last word, and in an effort to put his hands somewhere, he rested them on the generous curves of her hips. The elusive floral perfume she wore wafted around him and further helped to cloud his judgment. No matter how self-possessed he thought he was, she had always had the power to bring him to his knees.

“I’ve never known you to be slow.” One of her blonde eyebrows arched. “I want another kiss, and since you refused me, citing morals, I have decided to take one due to curiosity.”

Damnation. Her boldness enhanced his growing arousal. Where had she learned that, for he’d wager she’d never lain with a man. That supposition made him bite back a groan. *I can be the one who introduces her to coitus.* He adored that she wasn’t a meek and mild miss, but the longer she pressed herself against him, the bigger the possibility that she’d notice the evidence of his desire. And then what? Would her newfound courage desert her when presented with raw facts?

In the end, just as he’d said, he wasn’t strong enough to deny her. “I suppose I cannot refuse a lady’s request.”

For he wanted that kiss as much as she.

Evangeline’s grin could light up the night sky. “How very gentlemanly of you.” She leaned closer and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. Her light touch coupled with her warm curves nestled in his hands and lap worked to separate him from his honorable intentions.

“Let us both hope I remain such ten minutes from now.” It took little effort to cover her lips with his. When she uttered a sound of surrender at the back of her throat, he was lost.

Why had he not taken the chance when they’d courted? Even now

they could have enjoyed five years of marriage, perhaps had a child or two. Reality intruded and took the edge off his ardor. Those thoughts meant nothing, for she'd run from him and had taken all of his dreams with her.

Now he had new ones. That revelation left him reeling and he pulled slightly away, breaking their embrace. Marriage, starting a family, having a traditional existence were what he'd envisioned for his life back then. Never had he asked what she'd wanted out of hers. He'd merely assumed she'd wished for the same.

Dash it all! That would change starting from this moment.

"I would think you could at least attend me while I'm kissing you," she said, frustration and amusement mixing in her throaty whisper.

Jasper stared into her face and he grinned. "My apologies. It won't happen again." This time, he settled her more comfortably in his arms and applied himself to a second kiss with gusto. Her lips, soft and plush, were heaven. Her fingers threaded in his hair kept him focused on the embrace. And her curves. Dear God, Evangeline's voluptuous swells of breast and hip called to him, tempted his fingers until he could no longer resist.

If they had limited time together, then he'd do his level best to imprint these memories on her so she couldn't so easily forget him. Once more he broke the kiss, but trailed his lips along the underside of her jaw while he slid his hands down her back and cupped her rounded buttocks. The heat of her warmed his palms; the satin glide of her skin beneath his lips drove all common sense from him.

When he encountered the hollow at her collarbones, he teased the spot with his tongue. She sighed, arched her back, thrusting her breasts closer. The pink tips of her hardened nipples peeked through the thin cotton of the camisole, and he couldn't resist. "Oh Evie, you are splendid." He lowered his head and took one of those tempting buds between his lips.

Evangeline drew in a shuddering breath and let it go on a sigh. "Mmm." She straightened her spine, which gave him greater access. "I had no idea how good—oh!" Her eyes widened as he rubbed the flat of his tongue over her cotton-covered nub.

"This is just a taste of the wonders that await you once you find a man you might give your heart to, and marry." He transferred his attention to the other breast and plied it with the same attention until she was nearly whimpering with need.

"No." She placed her hands on either side of his head and guided his lips to hers once more. After a few heated seconds of tongues tangling and her squirming, which made his burgeoning situation more immediate, she wrenched away. "Why must love muck it all up? Why must I wed when I can experience intercourse without that

lauded state?" She punctuated the questions with another quick kiss. "I know my own mind. I am fully cognizant of the implications that will follow."

"That might be true, but if you fall into bed with every man who interests you, you will quickly be labeled a dirty puzzle." At the moment, he didn't much care if she were called a promiscuous woman as he palmed her generous breasts. The plump flesh filled his hands and fired his imagination. What he wouldn't do to slide them both to the floor, separate her from her lace-edged drawers and find her honeyed heat with his fingers.

"What does it matter?" she countered, and one of her hands wandered down his chest to linger dangerously close to his waistband. "I have read enough novels and have had scandalous talks with my friends to know what happens during the act. Why shouldn't I want to experience it? I do not need marriage for that, neither do I wish for mediocre."

Hellfire and brimstone.

Why did they need to have this conversation now? "You may believe you are independent enough to skirt tradition and society's dictates, but on this, I am adamant and do not want to see you used and defiled." He teased her nipples with the pads of his thumbs, and when she moaned in approval he grinned but quickly came to his senses. Wasn't that what he was doing now? His stilled his fingers but didn't remove his hands from her person. "Men will bed you readily enough, but will leave you when they tire of you." That thought sobered him and sent spikes of cold jealousy spearing through his chest. "I couldn't bear to know that's what had become of your life." The jealousy fled in the face of the fierce protection that raged now. He would do everything in his power to shield her from those men. "You are meant for better things than an easy mark for some man's prick."

That was the truth, and speaking it aloud was as effective as throwing a bucket of cold water on the seduction he'd wanted and planned for.

"Better things as in being little more than a man's breeder or a glorified housekeeper?"

"No! Men who would care for you—love you—won't treat you like an object. They'll help you, support your dreams." Why couldn't she see this? "Men like... me."

"I don't wish to risk it." She shook her head without acknowledging his suggestion. "Please, Jasper." The whispered plea almost had him resuming his activity. When she brushed her fingers over his rampant length pressed against the front of his trousers, two pitiful layers of fabric separating them, he sucked in a breath. "I want

this, and why shouldn't I do such an act with you, a man I already know and have history with, instead of someone I do not?"

Her reasoning held more logic than it should, but even still, this wasn't part of his plan. He'd assumed he would bed her after she'd promised to be his wife. "No." Jasper gathered her hands and held them behind her back. Not smart, that, for her breasts thrust tight into the thin camisole, tempting, oh so tempting. He glued his gaze to hers. "I cannot indulge your request for the simple fact that once the storm outside passes, you will leave. I refuse to have my world upended again. I barely survived the last time."

Damn it. He hadn't meant to admit such a thing, but there it was.

Her eyes rounded with shock and she struggled against his hold. "Let me go."

"Of course." Immediately, he released her hands. His passion cooled and the intensity of his arousal lessened. "Evangeline, I—"

"Stop." She slithered from his lap and when he assumed she'd march into his bedroom and slam the door, she surprised him again by pacing the length of the opposite sofa, the table between them. "What you say makes sense. Except..."

"Except what?" He hadn't the heart to tell her that her delicate unmentionables were rendered almost transparent each time she passed before the lamp resting on a side table.

"Except once again what I want is only given at the discretion of a man's whim." She curled her hands into fists and whirled to face him. "Do you know how aggravating it is to have an idea blocked, argued, derided just because it was put forth by a woman?" Her lower lip trembled. "Everything in this society—this world—is controlled by men, even down to the needs of my body—mine—which is under my control, yet upon marriage, this body—" She grabbed her breasts in her hands. "—becomes the property and possession of a man." With a cry of frustration, she threw her hands up in the air and her breasts swayed with the sudden movement. "None of this is fair."

"I agree, but do understand that while what you said is true, not all men will treat women like chattel. Not every man will demand a woman tie herself to a domestic life if that is not what she wishes." He shoved his hands through his hair and then held his head in his hands. "If you do not wish to be measured by 'all women,' you mustn't measure all men by the same stick."

For several long moments, Evangeline glared at him with the expression of a thundercloud, her chin notched up in defiance. She was the proud embodiment of nature's fury raging outside. Then she sighed and the fight left her shoulders. She slumped onto the sofa as if her bones would no longer support her. "You are correct. I do you a disservice as much as I have had done to me."

Jasper lifted his head, and when he met her gaze, tears sparkled there. "I understand why you wish to further your independence in this manner. It should be your right as a human being. All I ask is that you make your decisions wisely—discreetly—and don't let others devalue you simply because you are female."

"I will." She nodded, her gaze darting away. "I suppose in this regard I have failed as well." A tiny sob escaped her. "I have disappointed my mother, my aunt, you."

"No." She looked so forlorn that his heart ached for her. "My dear Evie, where you and I are concerned, there is no disappointment." He clambered to his feet, crossed the floor and resettled on the sofa beside her. "I have never met a woman with more fortitude or determination." Jasper took one of her hands in his. "Your courage and kindness set you apart. Your bravery alone could quell the hearts of the most hardened military generals." Those things and more had made him fall for her to begin with.

"More pretty words." A tear leaked from the corner of one eye and splashed upon the back of his hand. "Pardon me. The past few days have been trying. My mind is consumed with confliction and confusion."

"You are entitled to your feelings." He entwined their fingers, but when she pulled her hand away, he didn't protest. If she still wished to cling to finding her independence through her business, he would assist her, even if it sent her away from him. He wanted her happiness above all things. "I am going to help you sell your garments."

"How?" She stared at him, her lashes spiked with moisture. And she was even more enticing than she was before.

"Set up a shop here in London. There is more foot traffic and younger clientele. You wouldn't need to travel all over England." Which would put her closer to him and maybe then he could continue to woo her. At the very least he could watch over her.

Fear roiled in her expressive eyes. Evangeline shook her head. "It's... too overwhelming to think about right now."

Rain beat against the window, the only sound heard in the room for long minutes.

This time he refused to allow her to retreat from life or a possible future with him. "It would be easier with a partner. Together, you and I will locate shop space."

"My aunt wouldn't come to London, not now that Grandmother lives in Brighton." She shook her head, her expression growing closed. No doubt she'd already told herself all the reasons why the idea wouldn't work. Obviously, she'd missed his point entirely. "I would have to handle the business alone, and I'm not certain I have the knowledge or the credibility."

Jasper wanted to scream with frustration at her inability to see her worth or her potential or his willingness to help launch her. “You are never alone when I’m here.”

She took a quick gulp of breath and then another. Finally, she shot to her feet, panic lining her face, her eyes wide and hunted. “I cannot make such a decision at the moment, but I promise to think on what you’ve said.”

And then she fled the parlor. Her bare feet pounded against the hardwood as she crossed the hall to his bedroom. The door slammed behind her.

Muttering a curse, Jasper flopped backward against the sofa. God save him from high-spirited women, even if this one owned his heart.



For the first time in his career as a chocolatier, Jasper came downstairs to the shop an hour after opening. He’d overslept, his mind apparently drained from the events of the prior evening.

He manipulated his cravat as he made his way down the stairs, but when he would have stepped into the shop itself, the sound of Evangeline’s voice brought him to a halt and he lingered just inside the door. Positioning himself so he could comfortably observe, shock plowed into him when he caught sight of her behind the counter assisting Theodore with customers, a Parisian-style apron tied about her slim waist, protecting a gown he’d not seen before. The shade of peacock blue and green, combined with the low bodice, enhanced her natural beauty and made her eyes pop with color.

“Good morning, Mrs. Alrad,” Theodore greeted. “Yes, Mr. Winslow is out of pocket this morning—I think—but Miss Bradenwilde can help you with your selections. She has quite the discerning eye. I have tea to make for another customer.”

Still concealed, Jasper rolled his eyes. Young Theodore had lessons on tact to learn yet, and with one of their more prominent clients no less. Also, it was disturbing how willing the other man was to incorporate Evangeline into sharing his tasks. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a shoulder against the wall and continued to observe.

“Thank you for the kindness, Mr. Anderson, but I am not the expert that you or Jasper are.” She met Mrs. Alrad’s gaze. “If I were you, I’d consider one of these mouth-watering fruit tarts today, or if

chocolate is what you're after, the soft caramels topped with flaked salt will change your life." A smile sounded in her voice.

While they conversed, Jasper's gaze never left Evangeline's face. Her eyes sparkled while she made suggestions; her hands animated as she gestured toward confections she tried to steer the customer toward. Once she'd made the sale and Theodore boxed the purchases, she was immediately approached by another customer, this time a male.

Jasper frowned. A tall, blond man dressed to impress, his hair styled just so, whose face lit with a satisfied grin upon seeing Evangeline.

"How may I assist you today?" she asked with cheer and genuine pleasure that grated on Jasper's nerves.

"Securing dinner with you along with a box of your finest chocolates would be a terrific start," the man responded as he leaned over the counter to possess himself of her hand.

Jasper's body stiffened. The gall of the man!

But he needn't have worried. Evangeline extricated herself from his grip without losing her smile. "How about I fill your box with sweets and you can find a dinner companion elsewhere?"

"Perhaps, but I won't enjoy the confections quite as much without you on my arm," came his response that set Jasper's blood boiling.

"Do try and learn a new skill, sir. It will serve you well in life." She tempered the admonishment with a smile that had Jasper's chest tightening. "Now, shall we discuss your chocolates?"

Further conversation remained strictly on the candies, and Jasper's respect for her went up several notches. She'd handled herself with aplomb and diplomacy, all the while remaining unruffled. By the time she sent the gentleman on his way, three other customers waited for her attention and insight.

Through it all, Jasper watched with varying degrees of fascination and admiration. She was a natural in this setting. He stroked his chin as thoughtfulness fell upon him. Interesting, that. And perhaps it would open a whole new avenue he'd not previously considered, but would it be received with better reception by his reluctant lady?

During a lull, Theodore returned to the counter. "You have a knack, Miss Bradenwilde. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were born for this sort of work."

"Thank you." She briefly touched his arm and Theodore's face went as red as his hair. "I am merely showing my thanks to your employer for his hospitality."

"This rain has been unfortunate, but I heard talk it will end tomorrow. Finally have some clear weather."

"Is that right?" Was that panic in her voice? "I suppose one cannot

have rain every day, though. We all must learn to live our lives in the sun as well."

"Yes, ma'am. I have liked having your assistance this morning." Theodore grinned as if he had no sense. "It is certainly different with a woman about the place."

Evangeline's smile was ethereal as she regarded the younger man. "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly." His head bobbed as if he were an owl.

"Do you enjoy working for Mr. Winslow?"

Jasper's insides twisted. This was why no good ever came of listening at keyholes or around corners. What would his assistant say?

"I do, Miss Bradenwilde." Another round of enthusiastic nodding ensued. "Mr. Winslow is a top-notch teacher with a wealth of knowledge. He listens to my ideas. Never says my views are wrong, even when they differ from his. We work together to create new confections and designs." The man's eyes grew round with excitement. "Every once in a while, he'll put my creations in the case. That is a grand day indeed."

"I can imagine the thrill," Evangeline agreed. "There is something so pleasant about seeing your hard work on display, knowing that your chocolates will bring happiness to others."

"Yes, miss. Exactly that."

"Mr. Winslow has always been one of a kind. He is a true treasure to this world, England especially." Her voice trailed away, perhaps into thought.

From his doorway shelter, Jasper lost his heart to her all over again. Her opinion only solidified his decision to propose, and he would do so tonight if at all possible.

"He is that, miss. I thank the Creator every day he chose me to be his assistant." Then no more conversation was had since Theodore was summoned to one of the tables.

Finally, Jasper could no longer remain hidden. He stepped into the shop and greeted her as if he hadn't been spying on her. "I apologize for my tardiness."

A wash of pink splashed into her cheeks. "Think nothing of it. I have been enjoying myself immensely in your absence."

"Ah, so then you are content most without me?" He couldn't help teasing her.

"Don't be daft, Jasper," she said with a smile. "I meant I never thought I'd like selling chocolates with any amount of dexterity."

He nodded. "I knew it was balderdash when you stated you weren't inclined toward sales." He lifted a hand in greeting to Theodore. "One way or the other, my dear Miss Bradenwilde, life will see you as a raging success. Mark my words."

And he would be the stepping stone for that growth. Nothing was impossible. He would move heaven and earth for the woman he loved if only to see her smile again.

Chapter 9

The nearer closing time at the emporium grew, the more skittish Evangeline became.

All afternoon she'd worked alongside Jasper. He'd been the perfect companion and a congenial businessman. Over the hours, he'd shown her how he made a couple of his confits, even let her sample his newest creations. Not once did he tell her she needed to remove the apron she'd appropriated or cautioned her that she had no place in his world of confections.

Therein lay the problem. Being with him either in this capacity, talking over tea or sharing kisses and caresses was too easy. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle. There was familiarity there, but now it was peppered with excitement and anticipation. With each new surprising facet of his personality she discovered during their short time together, the more her heart yearned to be with him in a permanent capacity.

Which made her restless spirit quiver with chilling anxiety, a queer sort of terror that froze her heart and urged her to take flight once again before the fear could catch up.

She glanced beneath the counter where she stood, confident her packed and readied carpetbag remained stowed in the cupboard near her feet. While Jasper slept this morning, she'd hurriedly stowed her personal effects into the bag and hustled it downstairs. Even though the rain still came down steadily as it had for the past two days, she planned to leave the emporium and him once he closed the shop this evening. The trunk would be left behind.

Her chest tightened and her heart squeezed with a strong pressure. She bit down hard on her bottom lip to stave off giving in to the urge to cry. The feelings she held for him hadn't stayed in the past like she'd hoped. Instead, they had surged forward and multiplied and strengthened until all she thought about was him; all she saw when she examined her life was a typical *ton* life and all the domestic drudgery therein, despite his pretty words of the night before.

Men would say many things in their quest to bring a

woman to wife.

And as the terror of such a proper, boring existence mounted, she fought back against all the emotions that swamped her. She tried to push the confusion from her mind to encourage clear thoughts and logical decisions, to reassure herself that what she planned to do was the right course. If she allowed the walls around her heart to come tumbling down, if she gave herself permission to contemplate what a future with Jasper might entail, did that mean the death of everything she had spent her adult life fighting for?

“Looks like your head is in the clouds, Miss Bradenwilde,” he mentioned as he gravitated closer to her with a broom in his hands. “Care to share what has you wool-gathering?”

“I would not, Mr. Winslow.” It was best to return to the frosty woman who met him on the train platform the other night, for it would be the way he remembered her and the break would be gentler for him. “The crux of my thoughts have no bearing on my future.”

Would that it was so. One tiny decision could decide the fate of her future for good or for ill. The same decision would break this man’s heart for the second time in a five-year span.

How can I do that? Yet, how could she not, if making him happy would mean she’d be miserable? Her heart trembled again. A rather sticky wicket, that. Did a woman sacrifice herself at the marital altar because she wished for nothing except to see one Jasper Winslow spend the rest of his life in a joyful state?

But then, wasn’t that the very definition of love?

Evangeline gasped. Her eyes unfocused as she gaped. Surely she wasn’t in love with the chocolatier. Good heavens, she’d only been back in his company for two—now three—days.

The snap of his fingers in front of her face brought her crashing back to the conversation. “It wasn’t a question of the ages that required a sober answer. I merely attempted to lighten your mood.” His low chuckle vibrated in her own chest. “Come back to Earth.”

“I appreciate the attempt at diversion.” Despite the directions her mind was being pulled, Evangeline smiled. He always did have a knack for disarming her, for making her feel as if everything would work out in the end. “Forgive the prickles. I am somewhat out of sorts today.”

Tell me you are different. Tell me a life with you will be more adventure than a chore.

“With you, my dear, there is nothing to forgive.” He winked, and a twinkle gleamed in his eye, the same one she’d spied all those years ago before their lives were forever altered by the same decision she contemplated now. The lopsided grin made an appearance and her heart fluttered. “Would you do me the honor of having dinner with

me tonight?"

She wetted her lips as awareness of him heightened every sense. Memories from their kisses the night before assailed her. Gooseflesh raced over her skin. "Haven't we had dinner together for the last two evenings?" She clasped her hands together to help tamp down the urge to reach out and touch him.

"Yes, but I would especially like it if you would accept tonight." Jasper waggled his eyebrows as he leaned on his broom handle. He exuded confidence as only a man who is assured of a certain outcome could be.

And I'm going to destroy him again.

Still, another piece of her heart flew into his keeping. She nodded even as she knew she would never arrive at that table. His simple residence should be a large testament that he wasn't a representation of all she abhorred. Her resolve wavered. "That sounds delightful." Then she gave herself a stern warning. *Remain strong, Evangeline. No matter how different he seems, given half a chance, he will steal your freedom.*

He leaned close, secured her hand and brought it to his lips. Faint flutters tickled in her lower belly. Heat built in her core. Why did he have to be so charming? After brushing a fleeting kiss on her bare knuckle, he released her. "Until then. I shall count down every minute." He took his leave and soon he and Theodore were involved in end of the day chores.

Eventually, time passed and the young shop assistant donned his overcoat and his cap.

"Have a good night, Miss Bradenwilde. I hope to see you again soon," he said as he paused at the door.

She nodded and swallowed a couple of times to stave off tears. "That would be nice. Goodbye, Mr. Anderson." After an exchange of waves, he exited the shop.

Jasper popped in from his work room in the back. The light flickered off behind him. "Just let me lock the front door and we can adjourn upstairs for dinner."

A sick feeling circled through her stomach. "Let me do it," she blurted into the awkward silence that fell between them. "I mean, you've already done so much today. It's the least I can do to help." The longer she looked at him, the more the panic inside built. *I cannot go back.*

He narrowed his eyes but nodded. "Very well. Don't linger. I have wished for some time to ask you a question, and mean to do it tonight." With the light of speculation in his gaze, he removed his apron, hung it on a peg on the wall behind her and then disappeared into the stairwell. The rhythmic sound of his footsteps on the treads

grew steadily fainter the higher up he climbed.

Dear merciful heavens!

Her pulse pounded in her ears so hard it throbbed even into her fingertips. He meant to propose again. She knew as surely as she knew her own name. The panic doubled until it clogged her chest and throat in hot waves.

Not again. This cannot happen again.

As she promised, she moved through the shop, extinguishing lamps as she went. The whisper of her skirts across the black-and-white checked marble provided small comfort. Once murky shadows overtook the room as the last light went dark, she hurried over the floor and ducked behind the counter. Her hands shook as she fumbled for the cupboard knob. Finally, she opened it and drew out her carpetbag.

Now or never, Evangeline.

The urge to flee pumped through her veins, the terror of an unknown future spurring her into action. She darted around the counter, sprinted to the front door, the heels of her slippers echoing harshly in the empty shop. With fingers upon the brass hardware, she hesitated and stood staring into the still-steady rain outside.

Is it terrible of me not to give him—us—a chance? Can I take the risk?

She tightened her grip on the carpetbag's handle. In the end, she didn't have enough courage to find out. Screwing her resolve to the sticking point and straightening her spine, she pressed the handle and pulled open the door. The cheery jangle of the bells above set her teeth on edge and once more, she paused, listening. Would he come, alerted to her flight?

The thrum of her rapid heartbeat marked the seconds. When Jasper didn't make an appearance, she relaxed by increments and went to adjust the brim of her hat... only to realize in her haste she'd forgotten to bring that accessory down this morning. Again, she peered at the rain. A sigh escaped. No matter. Perhaps if she hurried, she wouldn't come away drenched.

Evangeline left the shop and closed the door behind her, the bells once more ringing. Jasper and his emporium were now firmly in her past. She'd made her peace with him. New beginnings were ahead.

Though thoughts crowded into her mind and her stomach muscles twisted with anxiety, she marched down the pavement and in front of darkened store fronts. It wasn't all that far to Berkley Square. Perhaps she should seek temporary shelter from the rain there and make her way to the train station at first light. She hunched her shoulders as the cold rain dribbled down her nape and beneath the neckline of her gown.

Drat! She'd also forgotten her jacket. What a ninny she'd become

since crashing back into Jasper's life. Thinking about him brought tears into her throat and she swallowed hard a few times. Crying wouldn't help. What she needed at the moment was to keep walking, put space between her and the man she couldn't forget. She would trek throughout London as long as it was away from a future of tradition and mind-numbing proper society functions and dictates.

She made it not more than fifteen feet from the emporium before a heavy hand landed on her shoulder, and when she cursed beneath her breath in outrage, she was swung around to face her would-be attacker. Not again. She refused to let herself become a victim as she had on the train. "How dare—"

Jasper stood before her without the benefit of hat or overcoat. The rain soaked into his jacket and wetted his hair. Annoyance flashed briefly in his eyes, and then disappointment overtook it. He dropped his hand from her person. "Will you always run from me, Evie?"

"I don't... I wasn't... I cannot..." *Devil take it.* Why did she need to explain her actions? Moisture crept along her skull and dripped over her forehead as she stood floundering before him.

"No more excuses or letting fear have free rein." He shook his head. "When will you let yourself be happy and realize you will be with me?" The sound of the rain snatched at his words, so she had to lean closer to hear them. "Your dreams will still remain intact. I won't take them away from you."

Her chin quivered. With her free hand, she dashed rain drops from her face. "How can I be assured of that? What if your pretty words are just that and once you've got me, you become like all those society people—like your parents or mine, like all the rest who live for show and titles and the façade?"

"Because I am not like them." He rolled his eyes heavenward before focusing on her once more. A few passersby on the street gave nods and curious stares, but no one lingered. "I am a man who believes every person—male or female—has great capacity to impart a special something to the world. I believe that every person wants to make a difference and that there's no reason why they cannot."

"Easier said than done if you are a male in today's society." A trace of bitterness clung to her words, yet she was too mentally tried to banish it completely.

"I'll admit it is easy for a man, but that leads me to my next point: I have available coin to help you live your dreams."

She shook her head and a tendril of wet hair dislodged itself to fall heavily about her shoulder. "Don't you see? Then it is not me who is succeeding. It would be your investment that makes such things possible for me. I am unable to do anything on my own power."

A sound issued from deep in his chest that rang like a growl.

“What the devil difference does it make?”

“It makes all the difference!” With an exasperated cry, she took a few steps away from him. Now she was wet and cold and more conflicted. “Remove me from the equation and it’s just another business for you to run, another feather in your cap that will make your parents proud. Eventually, you’ll grow tired of funding such an endeavor and then where will I be in all of it? Tied to you with no other prospects except to play hostess and bear your children.”

“Is that so horrible then?” he asked, his voice little more than a whisper and stolen by the rain before she could be certain of what she heard. “Is being my wife or the mother of my children—should we choose to have offspring—the worst that could befall you?”

So it was true. He did mean to offer for her. Heat jumped into Evangeline’s cheeks. “I suppose it wouldn’t be the worst thing, but I do not want it to be my only option. Accepting those things means handing over my freedom to you without hope of escape.”

“Why do you think so? You have nothing to indicate such about me.”

“I merely thought...” What, that he and society were one and the same? That because she’d seen the worst or what she assumed were negative traits in other men—in other unions—that he would conduct his life accordingly? Her resolve to distance herself wavered. “I mean...”

“I refuse to demand that you do anything you don’t wish to.” He took a few steps closer to her. “You were always high-spirited, Evie. I adored that about you, so much so that I feared I wouldn’t be enough for you.”

“What?” She opened and closed her mouth like a caught trout.

“It’s true.” He nodded. Rain slicked his face. Droplet clung to his eyelashes, his eyebrows, the tip of his nose and chin. “I thought perhaps you wouldn’t want a mere viscount’s second son, that perhaps you’d want a man who had substance behind him and a future before him.”

Her heart squeezed. “That is what prompted you to make your investments and learn a trade, make a name for yourself.”

“Yes. I changed, found happiness and contentment and from the work of my own two hands. I became someone I was proud of, but you weren’t there, and my happiness wasn’t one hundred percent complete.”

“Oh, Jasper.” Hot tears stung her eyes. Hadn’t she come to that same conclusion yesterday? Without him, any joy she could render from life would be riddled with holes. “It was never about that. I wanted passion.”

“I gave you that, showed you I’ve changed.”

"Yes." She nodded. "Back then I was gripped with fear."

"You still are, darling," he interrupted in a dry tone.

She continued on despite the tingles that raced up her spine from the endearment. "The man you were was perfect. Just not for me at the time."

"And now?" A glimmer of hope sprang into his stormy eyes.

"I am not sure." It was a safe response... for the moment. Indecision and blatant need warred for dominance in her gut. "It is complicated."

"Well, it seems we were two perfect fools back then. At least one of us continues to be." He laughed and the sound was forced and cold. "Five years is a long time. Lets a man think upon his life's choices."

When he remained silent and the rain continued to fall around then, Evangeline nodded in the hopes he would continue, that he would impart some profound wisdom to her that could help make up her mind.

"I loved you then, Evie. I love you now. Perhaps even more fiercely, for I have seen the woman you've grown into and know there's so much more you have to give. So much I want to see."

She gasped at his low-brow declaration. What should she say in return? How exactly did she feel once she looked past the ever-present fear? And once she did, would she like what she saw after fighting for so long?

"Ah, silence. That is exactly what a man wishes for after he's bared his heart." His jaw worked and he shoved the fingers of one hand through his sopping hair. The slicked-back furrows gave him a debonair edge. Then he shrugged and there was a certain finality about the gesture. "You will continue to believe what you want regardless of what I say. You have obviously already made up your mind due to past prejudices and flawed thinking."

"No, I—"

Jasper held up a hand, staying her protest. "Love means taking a leap of faith with another person. There are no guarantees in life or in romance. You will either make yourself happy or you won't outside of a relationship. And, my dear, if you cannot find gladness within yourself, I certainly won't be able to give it to you."

Was that true? Did she not let herself find happiness because of worry? Her eyes widened as she peered at him through the rain. "It is a constant endeavor."

"It is. I don't want a union between us to fail in five years because you're looking for greener pastures. If that is the case, nothing you do will ever satisfy you." He held her gaze. Sincerity and exhaustion lined his face. "I will not keep you in golden shackles. You have my word. All I am doing, or wanted to do at dinner but you ran from me again

before I could properly ask, is offer you all that I am and hope we can meet the future together, side by side.”

If her heart pounded any harder behind her ribs, it would tear clean out of her chest and probably jump into his arms. Such a traitorous organ.

He extended a hand in entreaty. “I want to celebrate every small victory with you and fight against every setback. We will work to make a life worth living, bask in the joy that we will find together.” He wiggled his fingers. “Will you trust me and let yourself break away from the fear?”

Tears fell in earnest to her cheeks. “When did you become such a wordsmith?” *Drat!* That wasn’t what she’d wanted to say. But old beliefs were a handy burden and couldn’t be given up so easily.

“It’s all part of the charm.” His smile was a tremulous affair. He dropped his arm back to his side. “Also, that wasn’t an answer, Evie.”

Of course it wasn’t! How could she say anything to him when she couldn’t pick through her feelings on the spot? She needed time to think about things, to weigh each option against others, to gird her loins into letting her hard-won freedom slip through her fingers.

“Again, you will overthink yourself right out of a decision.” His sigh seemed to come from his toes. “If you want independence with me, you’ll still have it. You needn’t do anything you don’t wish to. Where we live, how we spend our time, how you choose to fill your days, it’s all open to discussion. There are no set rules. But know this.” He closed the distance and placed both hands on her shoulders as he held her gaze. Water ran down his face. “I’ll make damn certain you meet your dreams, even if I have to drag you kicking and screaming after them along with me. That’s how much I believe in you.”

She sniffed and gave into a shiver, whether from the cold state of her wet clothing or the conviction in his voice, she had no idea. “It all seems a fairy tale, perhaps too good to be true.”

“Don’t hand me that gammon.” Irritation sounded in his voice. He stepped away and she missed the warmth he’d briefly imparted. “Above all, don’t discount what we’ve shared, what you feel deep down in your heart because your views of independence and freedom are tied up and twisted into misshapen monsters of your own making.”

That’s exactly what she’d done over the years. Fear had taken her hopes and dreams, wadded them up and distorted those images until she couldn’t discern the monsters from the heroes any longer. It had stolen the joy she’d derided out of the journey.

How did he see so clearly into her soul?

“I...” *Say something instead of standing here like an idiot!* Not even the chiding of her conscience could unstick her tongue. “I don’t know

what to say.” It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t a romantic response to everything he’d laid before her.

Jasper shook his head as the light slowly faded from his eyes. “Well, I guess I have my answer.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “Don’t let me keep you from your destination. Good luck to you, Miss Bradenwilde.” He flicked his gaze up and down her person. “In the circumstances, you may keep the apron. Consider it as a memento of our brief reunion.”

Frowning, she glanced down at her person to see the black Parisian-style apron she’d borrowed when she’d helped in the shop. “Oh, I...”

But he had already turned away and began walking toward the emporium.

A different sort of panic welled within her chest as she gazed at his retreating form. Never again would he offer for her. Chances were high that if they passed in the London streets, he would only acknowledge her with polite, empty greetings. How could she go through life without him in it?

Her heart stopped its beat for a full second, and in that tiny span of time she experienced a grand revelation: she loved him unequivocally and without fear. Everything else paled in comparison. All the problems that life threw at her could be tamed if he was with her. When her heart resumed its usual course, her vision—her very intent—clarified and the confusion that had clouded her mind vanished.

I cannot lose him.

“Jasper!” Had he heard her? Frantic when he continued to walk, she put one foot in front of the other, finally breaking out into a jog after him. “Jasper Winslow!”

Wonder of wonders, he turned around to face her at the door to his emporium. “Evangeline, is there something you would say to me?” One of his dark eyebrows arched, the effect blurred by the rain.

“Yes. Yes! Of course there is, you poor, daft, long-suffering man.” She closed the distance between them at a run and hurled herself into his arms with such force they both bumped against the door. “I choose you.” She dropped her carpetbag and held his head between her palms. “I choose to risk a future with you because I love you. I always have.”

Slowly, a grin spread over his face, and it was breathtaking. “It took five years but I’m glad you’ve finally come to your senses.” He tightened his arms around her.

“I’ll never live it down, will I?”

“Not for at least a little while.” His victorious tone was one of a man who had finally won a hard-fought battle.

Evangeline smiled as well. He was hers at long last. She’d merely

needed to move out of her own way. "Cheeky man." Raising up on her tiptoes, she kissed him with every ounce of need and feeling behind it. Perhaps there was something to be said for love after all. The heated, intoxicating rush banished the chill and she forgot her cold, wet state. When she broke the embrace, she said, "Shall we adjourn upstairs? I believe there was something you would ask me?"

"Now who's the cheeky one?" When he pushed open the door, she retrieved her abandoned carpetbag, and Evangeline was quite certain her whole life was about to change.

Chapter 10

Jasper couldn't believe his good fortune. After all this time, Evangeline Bradenwilde would be his wife. He peered at her through the gloomy shadows and she looked back with the same goofy expression on her face that he felt on his.

"Well." He tamped down the urge to roll his eyes at his less than intelligent comment. Not exactly erudite, and if he continued on this tract, she'd accuse him of being as tight as a boiled owl. That pulled a wider grin from him. Not drunk on liquor, just on her, on love, on the possibilities their future had in store.

"Well indeed." She dropped her soggy carpetbag. It hit the marble with a decided *plop!* Her eyes sparkled, more blue than green as she removed the borrowed shop apron and let it fall to the floor at her feet. "Shouldn't there be a bit more celebration?"

"Perhaps." Remarkably, now that most-important moment was upon him, his hands shook and anxiety slithered through his insides. "If you'll give me a moment to find—"

Evangeline interrupted his speech by closing the distance between them. She kissed him with more enthusiasm than finesse. Not that he minded. This was the woman he'd hoped to discover and draw out when fate had thrown them back together and she'd more or less consented to marry him. "Will it..." She nipped at his bottom lip; her breath warmed his cheek. "...take very much time?" The tentative sweep of the tip of her tongue along the seam of his lips sent electric-like pulses up and down his spine. "I find I'm not inclined to linger in the shop." Then her fingers were at the buttons on his jacket as she steadily worked each one from their holes.

"I cannot imagine that it will." Jasper stole a light bite of his own. "Continuing this conversation upstairs is just the ticket." He assumed control of the embrace and fit her snugly between his body and the glass counter. Her lips, as soft and plush as he remembered, cradled his. Every dip and curve of her body fit to his planes and angles—truly interlocking pieces of a puzzle. She matched him kiss for kiss, and when she made those soft little sounds at the back of her throat that

pulled at the threads of his sanity, his hold on decorum slipped. He wrenched away, his labored breath mirroring hers. "Unless you'd rather have relations on this cold floor, I suggest we retire to my rooms."

For she would be his this night. The location didn't matter.

"Intriguing concept." She glanced at the darkened plate glass windows at the front of the shop at the drawn shades. One of them had slipped back up. "Perhaps another time." Evangeline squirmed from his hold and headed toward the staircase. "I wonder which one of us would lose our nerve first knowing any person walking by could peer in?"

Jasper's jaw dropped. Where had this daring side of her been hiding? He shook his head to clear it. "Hold onto that thought. I just might have enough cheek to do it." Quickly, before she could surprise him yet again, he reached across the counter to a tiny, crystal pedestal. Beneath a glass dome rested one solitary chocolate bonbon—the one where he'd hidden the engagement ring. He procured the dish and then followed her up the wooden stairs.

Every swish of her wet skirting that clung to her generous curves, each sway of her rounded hips, he lost himself even deeper into the joy she represented. Unable or wait a second longer to ask the question that had haunted him for five years, he halted her progress at the doorway leading to the drawing room.

"Evangeline, wait." His hand shook and the glass dome on the crystal plate rattled. He removed the dome and stowed it on a small occasional table in the hall. "After everything we said to each other on the street, after everything we've shared—not only the last few days but a lifetime ago—there is something I would ask you."

She turned. Anticipation lit her expression, but when her gaze fell on the single-serve pedestal in his hand, she frowned. "You're presenting me with a chocolate confection?"

"Yes." He quelled the wont to laugh at the ridiculous picture he no doubt made. "No. For effect, yes."

One of her blonde eyebrows arched. "Don't you think there are other, more satisfying things we can be doing instead of indulging in confections?"

His shaft twitched to life as he thought of all the different ways he could incorporate chocolate into bed sport. "Evie, please." An exasperated sigh left him and he offered the bonbon. "Please, for the love of God, accept the sweet and taste it." Would that she never lost her spirit. Where many men would have wished for biddable wives, he wanted the challenged she represented. It was good for a man to remain tested.

"Fine." She removed the bonbon from the glass, held it between

her thumb and forefinger as if to inspect it and then she daintily bit into the thin chocolate shell. Pale purple cream oozed out from the break. The faint floral scent of violets permeated the air. "This is lovely."

It should be indeed. He'd infused the violet syrup into marzipan mixed with cream.

Tears filled her eyes and made them luminous in the dim light. "You never forgot the violets after all this time."

"Those flowers were a part of what I adored about you. Of course I wouldn't forget." He forced a swallow into his suddenly tight throat. "Sample more. There's a special addition to this." After setting the crystal plate onto the table with the dome, he moved closer to her, and when she didn't take another bite, he appropriated the chocolate confection from her. "Look." Gently breaking the sweet in half, he offered her the piece that contained the ring while popping the rest into his mouth.

Rich chocolate, nutty almond and sweet sugar melted on his tongue. When he finished it, the subtle floral taste from the violets lingered with a hint of their essence.

Perfection, much like the woman before him.

Evangeline nibbled at the treat and when she discovered the ring, she made short work of the confection. "Clever and darling." She spent a few long, heart-stopping seconds licking the sticky cream from the bauble until it was more or less clean. "I never thought I'd see this ring again." Emotion rendered her voice soft and raspy, and caused havoc with his already hard shaft. "I never thought I would have a second chance with you." A tear fell to her cheek and mixed with occasional droplets of water still seeping from her drenched tresses.

Jasper caught the tear with a finger. "I never thought I'd have cause to bring it out of storage."

The tendons of her neck worked as she stared at the ring. "As before, I am unsure of what to say."

"Allow me." He took the piece of jewelry from her and then grabbed her left hand. "Evangeline Jane Bradenwilde, you vex me beyond reason and bring me immeasurable joy." He smiled. It was as simple as that. She was everything he needed or had ever wanted in a mate. "I want to walk beside you for the rest of my life. I wish to support you and push you to greater heights. I look forward to growing old in wisdom and humor with you. After all these years, will you marry me?"

There was every chance she would refuse him after all, and his muscles strained for the inevitable.

Her hand trembled in his. She glanced at the ring and then into his face. Hope and happiness swirled in the depths of her peacock gaze.

"We've wasted so much time," she whispered, her chin wobbling.

"I wouldn't call it wasted, per say. Consider it more like gaining knowledge, so what when we came back together, we were both in the correct mindset." He squeezed her fingers. "And that wasn't an answer, Evie."

The smile she offered him gave her a radiant air that belied her wet, bedraggled appearance. "My answer is yes." Another tear fell, and this time, Jasper kissed away the moisture. "In my pursuit of independence, somewhere along the way I realized I could never have exactly that when you've been the keeper of my heart this whole time." She uttered a half-sob, half-laugh as he slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand. "Silly me. I should have come looking for you sooner, for I wasn't whole." She threw her arms around his neck and layered herself against his body. "The best part of me was always wrapped up in you. Like a chocolate confection!"

"Ah, Evangeline." He pressed a kiss into her wet hair, then pulled away enough to drop another onto her forehead. "You make me better too, so that must mean together, we'll be a force to be reckoned with."

She giggled and once more hugged him. "Perhaps we should post a notice so at least London can prepare."

"I concur." Jasper framed her face with his hands as he held her gaze. "I shall do my level best by you, and I hope our life together will make you proud."

"There is no doubt it will." She moistened her lips. "Is it a horrible thing I cannot wait to start?"

"Not at all." He moved his fingers into her hair and, one by one, he plucked out the pins. As the bits of metal pinged softly on the hardwood, her heavy tresses tumbled about her shoulders and back. "I feel the same." Then he claimed her lips in a kiss that had awareness of her prickling his skin. He slanted his mouth more firmly over hers and when she opened for him on the heels of a moan, he slipped his tongue inside to duel with hers.

He was completely and utterly lost.

"Jasper..." Evangeline broke the embrace in an effort to remove him from his jacket. This time she succeeded and the garment slipped unheeded to the floor. "Will you send me flying?" She manipulated the buttons on his vest and they fell to her nimble fingers.

"Do you promise you won't run away?" The tiny row of buttons at the back of her gown captured his attention, and as quickly as he could, he worked them from their holes.

"Absolutely." She shoved the vest from his body. It joined his jacket at their feet. "My days of fleeing from you are over. I've been well and truly caught."

"Sweeter words were never spoken." He grunted when her gown

gaped and he easily tugged it down her arms. Another yank sent it along her torso and he encouraged the heavy, wet fabric over her hips until it hit the floor with nary a whisper.

"So says the confectioner," she whispered, and with the pull of her hand, she guided him toward the stairs leading up to his bedroom. "I wonder how I will compete?"

"Who says you need to?" He caught her at the landing, and pressing her back against the wall, he plied her with kisses as he unbuckled the belt holding her bustle into place. When it fell, he methodically unbuttoned both of her petticoats and shoved them down her hips. Snowy, lace-trimmed fabric dropped at their feet. "I'd rather enjoy you as I do all of my treats."

"You, sir, are quite the expert at flirtation." Two tugs had his cravat loosened and discarded. "But how are you at the chase?" Without another warning, Evangeline ducked beneath his arm and took to the stairs at a run.

Jasper couldn't help his grin. She would add much needed fun and excitement to his life. "If we are to be truthful, I could say I've been chasing you in some form or fashion for five years." He pelted up the stairs after her, and the passageway echoed with the sound of their shoes on the wooden treads. By the time he gained his bedroom, he'd shed his cuffs and collar.

She stood in the middle of the room, already undoing the tiny hooks at the front of her corset, the same pink sateen one she'd modeled for him the night before. Her beaded, heeled slippers lay abandoned nearby. An oil lamp on the bedside table flickered in its lowest setting. Shadows jumped and lengthened along the walls. "Was I worth the pursuit?" When the corset gaped open, she yanked it off and then dropped it to the floor where it fell like a bizarre sort of butterfly. "I mean, I broke your heart and still you loved me." When she propped her hands upon her hips, the thin cotton of her camisole pulled taut across her breasts. The hardened tips of her nipples thrust against the fabric, calling to him.

"A heart will always mend in the right hands." He slipped off his suspenders and pulled his shirttails from his trousers. Another two jerks had the garment up and over his head. As he threw it from him, he advanced on her. "I would have searched the ends of the Earth had fate not intervened." He toed off his shoes as he went. "I have waited too long for this day."

She held out her arms and he gladly walked into her embrace. "I hope the dreams are as wondrous as the reality might be."

"Let's find out." Scooping her up into his arms, he ferried her over to the bed and then laid her gently down.

Soft moans and gasps broke the silence and melded with the steady

drumming of the rain against the windows as he removed her lace-and-ribbon bedecked camisole and then slid the matching drawers down her legs. Stockings were carefully eased along her satiny skin until she reclined naked on his bed. The strawberry-blonde mass of her hair a puddle of molten gold beneath her.

“So gorgeous,” he breathed, not quite sure what else to say. His shaft pressed insistently against the front of his trousers as he devoured her with his gaze. Generous breasts and hips, the nip of her slim waist, the slight tremble of her creamy thighs, the way she sought modesty as she covered the thatch of red-gold curls at the apex of those delectable thighs with her hand where his ring twinkled all worked to render him nearly speechless. “I knew you would be.”

And suddenly he didn’t feel worthy of her.

“Love me, Jasper,” she said in a breathless whisper, her eyes wide and round, expectation and apprehension clouding the depths.

His confidence returned in a rush of heat. “As my lady wishes.” It took mere seconds to shuck out of his trousers and small pants, and then he stood, naked for her perusal, except for the socks and garters he wore to keep them on his calves. Would she enjoy the look of him? He divested himself of them too while he pondered. When she levered herself up on an elbow and her attention lingered on his erect and throbbing manhood, he thought he might die a thousand deaths as he waited for her verdict.

What the devil did a man do with his hands while the love of his life visually inspected his prick for the first time?

In the end it didn’t matter, for she smiled and beckoned him over with the veriest crook of her index finger. He complied with a smirk and a victorious laugh, and then she was in his arms and he applied himself to the task of kissing every inch of her silken skin.

Even during intimacy, Evangeline wasn’t meek or mild. She explored him as much as he did her, and the glide of her fingers along his body, the scrape of her fingernails over his skin, turned his blood into lava. Her lips along his shoulders, the nip of her teeth over his torso, had him gasping for breath and fighting for control.

He palmed her breasts and delighted in the way their fullness fit his hands. The pebbled texture of her nipples against his tongue would forever remain in his memories. When she arched her back and gave him greater access to those charms, he gladly began his sensual torture all over again, until she slid a hand between their bodies and wrapped her fingers around his rampant length.

“Ah, damnation. Careful with the goods, Evie, else I’ll come without you.” The insistent pressure she gave, the gentle squeezing motion she teased him with, sent him closer to the brink. “I want your first time to be memorable, not rushed.” Apparently, she didn’t care,

for she continued with her exploration by cupping his stones and treating them to the same tender care. His shaft tightened almost painfully and he rocked against her.

A throaty chuckle escaped her. "And I wish for my first time to leave me wanting more." She drew her fingers back up his length and then glanced her fingertips over his tip. A moan rasped from him and she laughed again. "I have a feeling you and I will spend many hours employed thusly."

The point of no return drew near. "One second." Jasper rolled away from her and then left the bed altogether. At her sound of protest, he grinned as he availed himself of a flat, rectangular box that rested on his washstand, procured soon after Evangeline came back into his life, for just this sort of eventuality. "There are precautions, my dear." Once he'd drawn out a sheath from the box's interior, he carefully slid the thin material over his erect member and secured it just under his stones. When he returned to the bed, Evangeline frowned.

"Is that necessary?" She eyed his skin-covered member with speculation.

"At this moment, yes." He inserted a knee between her thighs and encouraged them to part. "I refuse to put you in a predicament we haven't talked about or you are not certain you want." As she spread her legs wider, he came down over her and fit his tip to her slippery opening. "I love you, Evangeline, and don't wish to do anything that will compromise your future options."

"You are one of the last true gentlemen." She looped her arms around his shoulders, and with a bump of her hips, he slid a tiny bit inside. "Is it any wonder I fell for you?"

He didn't answer with words. Instead, he kissed her deeply, tangling his tongue with hers, and at the same time slid through the tight fit of her passage. When he broke through the thin wall of her resistance and she gasped against his lips, he paused and let her adjust to the feel and size of him. "Is it too painful to continue?" If she cried off, he would oblige, but he needed to know soon.

"It was a sharp pain, but..." She wriggled her hips, which sent him a jot deeper and pulled an involuntary groan from him. "It is not uncomfortable." Again, she flexed and moved beneath him until she found a position that worked. "In fact, it is quite marvelous."

Jasper rested his forehead against hers. "This is only the beginning." He withdrew and at her budding protest, he grinned as he thrust home, burying himself to the root. Sensation tingled through his tallywags and up his shaft. "I apologize in advance. Despite my best efforts, this will be a rushed affair."

And he began to move in and out of her honeyed heat. With each

pass, the friction mounted and the need for control withered.

"Then we shall have to have an encore performance in the morning," Evangeline said between delighted gasps. She gripped the meaty part of his shoulder with one hand while the other curled into the bedding. Every time he stroked downward, he guided her into what she should do in order to gain greater satisfaction, and she lifted her hips until they came together in a frantic rhythm that left them both breathing heavily and sharing sounds of pleasure.

His lady was a natural with intimacy and the enjoyment therein.

The more urgent his thrusts grew, the more thoughts swirled about his mind of future bouts of lovemaking. His control snapped. He bit out a curse as he braced himself on his elbows. "I'm done, love." Knowing it was her first time and she probably wouldn't find bliss from coitus alone, he slipped a hand between them and easily found her center. He strummed his fingers over her slippery nubbin, rubbing the swollen bud harder and harder. "Come with me, Evie. Fall over the edge."

Sweat broke out on his forehead and back. He drove into her faster and with greater force, continuing to torment that all-important bundles of nerves. Finally, her body went rigid beneath him. Shocked wonder lined her face. Her eyes fluttered closed. A keening cry broke her lips. Her inner muscles contracted around his shaft and pulled him into his own release.

Jasper sighed as the hot tension raced through his length and tightened his stones. That energy exploded and his member jerked as his seed emptied into the sheath. He ground his pelvis into hers to prolong the sensations for both of them. Finally, exhausted, he collapsed on top of her, burying his nose into the crook of her shoulder.

"That was as sweet and indulgent as one of your confections," she whispered into his ear. She followed the pronouncement with a gentle bite to his lobe. "It wasn't nearly long enough for me to properly enjoy."

He snorted as he battled lethargy. "I thought you didn't wish for proper?"

"I do not." Evangeline wrapped her arms around him and clamped her knees around his hips, holding him close. "However, I rather think this whole act isn't considered proper in some circles." That seemed to amuse her for she giggled. "As for me, I'll need to conduct more personal research." She kissed his chin. "With varying positions." Another peck landed on his cheek and she lowered her voice. "Plus, I wonder what you would do if I were to pleasure you with my mouth. Do men enjoy that?"

Oh, God. She would be the death of him, but what a sweet way to

expire.

"They do find pleasure in such an act, but that is for later in our relationship." He rolled them both onto their sides. His rapidly deflating member slid out of her and he immediately missed her intimate warmth. "As for positions, I will indulge you in whatever you wish to try." The thought brought renewed need tickling along his nerve endings. It wouldn't be long before he could pleasure her again.

She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. Her eyes gleamed more green than blue. "Will we marry soon? I'd rather not court more scandal than we already have. Imagine what Grandmother will say."

"As soon as it can possibly be arranged, though do bear in mind there are set conventions for these things. Visits from family members. Parents to consider." When she sighed, he grinned. "Still, all of that is for proper couples and men who are beyond boring." He brushed his lips across hers when she giggled. "This coming weekend we will call upon your parents and then mine. Everything else can be decided and planned from there."

"Then we shall need to make great use of the time we have together now. Once the rain stops, I will have to return to Brighton." She drew her hand to his shoulder and onward down his arm until she twined her fingers with hers even as his body stiffened.

"Evangeline, I thought we'd talked about—"

"Shh." She kissed him. "It is not a case of running this time, Jasper." She brought his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. "I want to tell my family this news, and perhaps convince my mother that you shall need to call upon me and often, which means I shall have to temporarily move back into their house here in London."

"Clever girl." He relaxed into the mattress. "I will indeed call often." And having her within the same city would ease his mind. He could see her when they could manage it.

"And Jasper?"

"Hmm?" Really, he should rouse himself and remove the sheath, but being here with his lady in his arms and the post-coitus exhaustion weighting his limbs was too luxurious to break.

"I also want to return to Brighton to inform my aunt of one critical change to my future above and beyond being married."

"Oh?" What was she about now?

"Yes." Evangeline nodded. She smiled and it was as if the sun shone exclusively for him. "I have decided to leave the underpinnings business."

"And do what?"

"Work with you at the emporium. I've found I particularly like it and think the art of chocolate making is fascinating." She lifted onto an elbow. "Unless, of course, you forbid it."

“Darling, I would forbid you very little.” His heartbeat accelerated. Warm pleasure washed over him. Those hours they’d spent in the shop earlier in the day would now become a lifetime. What had he ever done for such luck now? “If this is something you truly wish to do...”

“I do.” If possible, her smiled widened and he wanted to spend all of his time basking in that glow, knowing he’d had a hand in putting it there. “If you’ll have me.”

“I will.” He rolled them both over and trapped her beneath him. “In every way you wish to offer yourself up.” After several minutes spent kissing her senseless had passed, he held her gaze. “I look forward to teaching you all that I know.”

“My noble chocolatier.” She slid a hand to his nape and urged his lips to hers.

“Indeed. Every lady needs one, don’t you think?” Then Jasper began the delicious task of acquainting himself with every secret her body held.

For the rest of his days, he would have her by his side, and that was the only thing he’d been missing for five years.

Life was truly sweet.

The End

Delighted by the Duke

Fabled Love

USA Today Bestselling Author Amanda Mariel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2017 Amanda Mariel
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the express written permission of the publisher.

For every parent who loves a child because they can and not because they have to. It takes a big and pure heart. Know that you are making a real difference!

Also by Amanda Mariel

Ladies and Scoundrels series

Scandalous Endeavors

Scandalous Intentions

Scandalous Redemption

Scandalous Wallflower

Coming soon to the Ladies and Scoundrels series

Scandalous Liaison

Fabled Love Series

Enchanted by the Earl

Captivated by the Captain

Enticed by Lady Elianna

Delighted by the Duke

Lady Archer's Creed series

Theodora (Christina McKnight writing with Amanda Mariel)

Georgina (Amanda Mariel writing with Christina McKnight)

Adeline (Christina McKnight writing with Amanda Mariel)

Coming soon to the Lady Archer's Creed series

Josephine (Amanda Mariel writing with Christina McKnight)

Stand alone titles

Love's Legacy

Coming soon

More Than a Lady

Connected by a Kiss

****These are designed so they can stand alone****

How to Kiss a Rogue (Amanda Mariel)

A Kiss at Christmastide (Christina McKnight)

A Wallflower's Christmas Kiss (Dawn Brower)

Box sets and anthologies

Visit www.amandamariel.com to see Amanda's current offerings.

Prologue

L*ondon 1812*

Miss Emma Baxter paused outside of her uncle's office unable to ignore the raised voices coming from within.

"You will settle your debt or face debtor's prison." A raspy male voice shouted.

"Surely I have something other than coin that you would be willing to accept," Her uncle, Mr. Silas Powell, suggested.

Emma crept closer and peeked through the crack of the partially open door. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Lord Winham stood near her uncle's desk, a tumbler of amber liquid in his beefy hand.

"You should refrain from gambling if you haven't the blunt to settle your losses, Baxter."

She should have guessed as much. Uncle Silas had gambled away nearly everything they had, save for the house and a few baubles her aunt had entrusted to her before she passed away. Those too, would no doubt have been lost as well if Uncle Silas knew she possessed them. He'd claimed to have stayed away from the gaming hells these past months. All the same, she wasn't the least bit surprised to hear he was in trouble again.

After all, it was only a matter of time where Uncle Silas was concerned. He always fell back into the trap. The habit had caused a continuous heartache for her aunt while she lived, and likely caused her death. Poor thing, she had loved him deeply despite his failings and as a result fretted more than was good for any one person.

"You are welcome to anything I posses, Windham. Name your desire and it is yours."

What was there to take other than their home? Her uncle's pub, she supposed. One would be as devastating a loss for them as the

other. If Windham took the house they would have no shelter—if he took the pub they would have no income.

“Perhaps there is one thing you possess of interest to me.” Windham rubbed his rounded chin between his thumb and forefinger as she stared, her belly in knots. “Miss Emma.”

Bile rose in her throat. She fought to suppress it as she stared at the men. Uncle Silas would never...

“Done,” Uncle Silas agreed. “She is yours to do with as you please.”

How could he! Was it not bad enough that her own father gave her away after her mother’s death? Now her uncle intended to use her in order to settle his debt. She’d not stand for it. The office door ricocheted off the papered wall from the force she used entering the room. “You cannot give me away like I am nothing more than an old settee.” She glared at Uncle Silas prepared to do battle.

Both men stared at her with rounded eyes. Windham recovered first and ambled over to her. “Calm down, pet. I will make you a fine husband.” He reached out one meaty hand, resting it on her lower back. I have desired you for years and promise not to disappoint.

She jerked away from him then moved to the opposite side of the drab room, her slipper clad feet pounding the worn rug beneath them. “I will not marry you, Lord Windham.” She turned her attention on Uncle Silas. “You cannot force me.”

Uncle Silas offered a smile as he rounded his desk coming toward her. “Do be reasonable, Emma. Lord Windham is a wealthy baron. A far better match than you could have hoped for. Hell, you do not even have a dowry, but now you will be a countess.”

She stiffened her back. “Have you thought to ask yourself why a wealthy baron would seek my hand?” She would wager he had not. Furthermore, the answer could not be undying love. The baron’s intentions arose from lust at best. Good Heaven’s, he’d said as much only a moment ago. The way he gazed at her on the rare occasions they were in the same room always sent chills through her. Death would be preferable to a forced marriage with the old lecher.

“His reasons do not signify. Fact is, Lord Windham has offered for you and you will accept.”

“I most certainly will not,” She raised her voice a fraction.

Windham studied her from his place near the window a slight curve to his plump lips and something dark in his gaze. “I have longed to possess you from the moment I first laid eyes on you, Miss Emma. You will be the jewel in my barony.”

Uncle Silas took firm hold of her upper arm, leaning in so close she could smell the liquor on his breath. “You owe me for all the years I have cared for you.”

"I never asked for your care. Father sold me to you." She fought back her rising tears. "I owe you nothing."

Windham approached, placing his hand on her shoulder, he whispered in her ear, "Once we are wed, I will see you tamed, pet."

She glared at him, "Never. I will never marry you."

He ran his hand down her back to her buttocks, squeezed, then strolled to the door before turning back to her Uncle. "See that she complies, Baxter. I expect to be wed in three weeks time or it will be debtor's prison for you. I will have a betrothal contract outlining the wedding plans sent over for your signature." Windham tossed her a lecherous smile before taking his leave.

"I will never marry you. No one can force me," Emma yelled at his retreating back.

Her head snapped to the side as her uncle's open hand smacked into her cheek. She placed her own hand over the stinging flesh. Her resolve strengthened and she held her head high in challenge. "You can do whatever you please, Uncle. But know this. I would embrace death before a marriage to Lord Windham."

"You always were a foolish chit." He pulled her from the office then pushed her toward the stairs. "You will remain locked in your room with nothing more than a meal a day to sustain you until you see reason and accept Windham."

She started up the stairs, her chin notched defiantly. "You might as well refrain from sending food. I will not eat a bite."

"You only harm yourself. You will be wed to the baron with or without your consent."

His heavy footfalls behind her urged her to walk faster as she made haste for the sanctuary of her chamber. She knew not how she would get out of this marriage, but there was no way she could comply. She'd think of something—some way, somehow, she had to escape the baron's clutches.

Chapter 1

Three weeks later,
English countryside

Emma stared out the carriage window, refusing to acknowledge Lord Windham or her uncle Silas. She had to escape before they reached Windham's Hampshire estate, but how? And more importantly, where would she go? Today marked their third day of travel since leaving London. By nightfall, they would reach Windham's. A shiver trickled down her spine. She simply could not abide the baron.

She glanced at the two men, sitting across from her grateful that neither seemed to be paying her any mind. Her skin crawled when she looked at Windham. There was no way she could ever allow herself to be wed to him. Escaping had to be her top priority whether or not she had somewhere to go. And how could Uncle Silas do this to her? His own flesh and blood!

Perhaps she should have runaway the first time they'd stopped for the night. She'd had the opportunity as Uncle Silas and Lord Windham had left her alone in a coaching inn room while they went off to drink. Neither man returned until the early morning hours. Alas, fear had frozen her—not today, for great change required courage and she was very much in need of a change.

She swallowed hard. "Uncle Silas?"

"Yes." He tipped his head up to meet her gaze.

Emma gave a practiced smile. "I am suddenly quite famished. When might we stop?"

Uncle Silas turned to Lord Windham. "It is nearing luncheon. What say you?"

Emma fought the urge to avert her gaze as Lord Windham turned his cool brown eyes on her. "I am pleased you have finally decided to

be reasonable, my dear.”

A smart retort caught in the back of her throat, schooling herself, she held it back. She wished to tell him that her request had nothing to do with being reasonable, or that starvation did that to a person, but it would not do to give rise to suspicion. Instead, she simply said, “I have.”

“Very well. We shall stop at the next coaching inn,” Lord Windham said, then knocked on the window with his cane.

The coachman slid the glass pane open. “Yes, my lord?”

“Stop at the next coaching inn. While we eat, I wish for you to change out the horses.”

“’Tis one just down the road. Won’t be but a few minutes.”

Lord Windham uncrossed his short, beefy legs. “Very well, make haste.” He turned his lecherous eyes on Emma. “My pet requires sustenance.”

She shivered with revulsion as she ran her finger over the design carved in the molding of Windham’s coach.

The coachman closed the window and Emma felt the carriage gain speed. She settled back against the plush seat, her heart pounding. Pray, let her manage to get away, and grant her strength to tolerate Lord Windham until the chance to run presents itself.

Before long, the carriage swayed as they turned into a drive, then lurched to stop in front of an inn. Emma braced herself with her hands to keep from tumbling from her leather and velvet seat.

“I will assist you out of the coach, my pet.” Lord Windham winked.

A forced grin tugged at her lips. “Thank you.”

The footman placed the step before opening the carriage door. Emma did her best to appear relaxed as the men departed the coach. She inhaled a deep breath then let it out slow before moving to the carriage door and accepting Lord Windham’s arm. Disgust swept through her when he placed his hand over her gloved one where it rested uneasily at his elbow.

Everything within her cried out for her to remove her hand from him. Her stomach churned and bile rose in her throat, but she fought past the uneasiness and forced herself to play the part. As they made their way up to the entrance, through the receiving area, and into the dining room, Emma continually scanned her surroundings looking for both an escape route and somewhere to hide.

There were several shadowed nooks and large drapery covered windows a person could conceal themselves in. More than a few large pieces of furniture one could hide beneath, and countless doors leading away from the common areas she could dart through.

But, the exterior of the inn seemed to offer the best avenues for escape. A thick copse of trees surrounded the building that she could

most certainly get lost in, or she could find sanctuary in the stables concealed under a haystack or stashed away in the loft. Furthermore, she'd noticed several horses as well as carriages about that she could use to get away.

Emma turned the possibilities over in her mind as Lord Windham led her through the dining room to a small round table.

He ran his meaty hand down her back, leaning in close. "You will be rewarded for your change of attitude." His breath fanned her ear making her cringe, but at least he refrained from fondling her on this occasion.

Emma nodded, wishing for nothing more than to take her seat. She exhaled a breath she'd been holding as she accepted the chair he pulled out for her. Her skin revolted at Lord Windham's touch. She doubted there was enough hot water in all of England to make her feel clean again.

"Good day." An older woman, her grey hair pulled into a tight knot at the base of her neck approached their table. "What can I fetch for ye?"

Uncle Silas looked to Lord Windham and Emma's heart hitched. She could not help but feel sorry for her uncle. Though his financial straits were of his own creation, she understood how it pained him to be at the barons' mercy.

If only he'd not been so foolish. She sighed, averting her gaze. As much as she would like to save her uncle, she could not, for she'd not sacrifice her own wellbeing.

"A couple of pints of your finest ale and tea for the lady. Bring some beef stew, bread, and butter as well," Lord Windham ordered. "Do you desire anything else, my pet? Perhaps a sweet treat?"

Emma forced herself to meet his gaze. "No, what you have ordered is more than sufficient, my lord."

He turned his attention back to the serving woman. "That will be all."

"Right away, Me Lord." The woman turned and bustled away.

Lord Windham slid his chair closer to Emma's, reaching out to rest his hand on her thigh.

She could not fight the urge to react, jumping at the invasion before settling herself. Even through her skirts, her skin crawled at his touch. She swallowed hard, focusing on her plan.

"We are to be wed by this time on the morrow. Let us do away with formalities. Please address me as Leviticus." Lord Windham patted her thigh.

Had anyone in the crush of guests noticed the familiarities he was taking? Emma closed her eyes, reminding herself that she had to play along. "As you wish, Le...Leviticus." The name soured on her tongue.

“Might I be excused for a moment?”

“Indeed, but do not tarry for I want you to eat while your meal is still hot.” Lord Windham smiled. “You will need your energy on the marrow.” He squeezed her thigh before removing his disgusting hand from her.

Emma forced a painful grin before rising from her chair. It took all she possessed to get up in a graceful manner rather than bolting from the seat as she wished to. With her attention trained on the exit, she made her way across the crowded dining room.

Reaching the door, she stepped through, then gave into the urge to glance over her shoulder. Lord Windham stared at her from across the room.

She gave a quick grin then turned into the hall as if she were going to use the privy. After taking a moment to catch her breath, she circled back and walked with hurried steps toward the main exit.

The bright noonday sun caused her to squint as she stepped into the drive. With a cursory glance around, she decided to make her way to the stables. She would stash herself away there until she decided what to do next. Ignoring her pounding heart, she continued toward the building.

Emma drew to a stop outside of the stable entrance. Several voices drifted out from within the large wooden building. Drat! She should have suspected there would be people within. It would be impossible for her to sneak past them without detection and being seen would not do. Surely, someone would give her away the moment Lord Windham and Uncle Silas came looking.

Her eyes lit on a nearby traveling coach pulled by four matching gray horses and tethered to a hitching post. Emma could not guess whether the carriage was preparing to come or go, nor did she know if anyone occupied it, though she meant to find out. She nibbled her lower lip, moving closer to the conveyance.

Emma looked around once more, not at all sure what she should do. Maybe taking her chances in the woods would serve her best, though she was quite certain she'd be safer in the carriage boot. One thing was certain, she could not stand her all day or she'd not get away from Lord Windham at all.

She stepped crept up to the back of the coach and lifted the boot open in preparation to climb inside. Her heart sank, the compartment held far too much luggage for her to fit within. She lowered the lid back into place, her pulse hammering. What was she to do now?

Panic filled her at the sound of Uncle Silas's voice. “Emma. Emma, where are you?”

Without thought, she gathered her skirts in her hands and moved to open the carriage door before tumbling inside. She scrambled to

pull the door closed before drawing in a deep breath, her hand on her chest, covering her racing heart.

Thank God the coach was unoccupied, but for how long? Could she grovel for mercy from the coaches' owner? Seated on the carriage floor, she leaned against the bench seat and pulled her knees to her chest. Escaping seemed impossible, perhaps she should accept her fate and return to Uncle Silas and Lord Windham.

The very idea sent a wave of sickness through her. No, she'd not give up—could not give in. Emma pushed herself up, glancing behind her as her skirt caught on the bench. A smile spread across her face when she saw the seat lifting behind her. Thank Heaven.

She took hold of the seat with one hand as she turned, then lifted it to peer inside. A large compartment greeted her curious eyes with only a small box and folded blanket inside. Without a second thought, Emma climbed into its depth and lowered the bench seat to conceal herself.

She knew not where the coach would be traveling, nor when it would depart, but at least for now, she was safe.

Chapter 2

Aaron St John, Duke of Radcliff, pulled back the curtain to look out the carriage window. He had been traveling for nearly ten hours stopping only to tend to his horses and stretch his legs. Even now he itched to depart from the carriage, but would not make a stop so close to home. He wished to arrive in time to enjoy supper with his daughter Sophia.

He'd never spent more than a night away from Sophia since her mother ran off. After a sennight away, he missed her fiercely. Her smiling cherub face entered his mind and he grinned reaching for the opposite bench. A golden haired doll, the same shade as Sophia's, had caught his eye in a London shop. On impulse Aaron strolled in and purchased it for her.

He lifted the top of the bench to retrieve the doll, his breath hitching. "Bloody hell."

He peered into the compartment; a wide eyed woman stared back at him, her hair the same golden shade he'd just been imagining. It was as if the doll had come to life in the shape of a breathing woman. "Who the devil are you? How did you get here?"

She sat up, her cheeks tinting scarlet. "I...I do not know where to start."

Recovering slightly, Aaron reached out a hand. "Start by getting out of there."

She nodded, accepting his offer. Heat passed between their ungloved hands, warming his palm. Aaron pulled her to stand, then assisted her to step from the compartment. As soon as she was free of the compartment, he dropped her hand, turned, and closed the bench—Sophia's doll all but forgotten. He turned back to the mysterious woman. "Do sit and explain yourself at once."

She lowered herself onto the plush seat, folding her hands in her lap as Aaron retook his own seat across from her.

"Please accept my apology for startling you." She smoothed her skirts. "It was not my intent. You see, you were not supposed to discover me."

“Fascinating, do go on.”

“I am Miss Emma Baxter.” She looked away for a brief moment.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance Miss Baxter. You may address me as Your Grace.”

The woman’s violet eyes rounded again, but only for a second before she masked her surprise. She clearly had no idea whose carriage she’d stowed away in. He studied her for a moment, taking in her hallowed cheeks, pale skin, and wrinkled frock. She appeared as though she’d been through quite an ordeal. “Now explain how it is you came to be inside of my coach?”

Miss Baxter averted her gaze, a deep blush blooming across her face. “I...” She drew a breath and met his gaze. “I am not quite sure how to explain. You see the answer is not at all simple.”

Aaron rubbed the back of his neck. “Start at the beginning and give me the highlights.”

“Well, you see, I was—” The coach came to a stop and the driver called out, cutting off her words. “It really is not a simple answer, Your Grace. I fear the explanation will take some time.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Never mind the reason. My driver will take you anywhere you wish to go.” He stood as a footman opened the carriage door. “Give my coachman directions and be on your way, Miss Baxter.”

Her shoulders slumped as she looked up at the coaches’ roof. “It is rather late for traveling.”

“Daddy, Daddy, your home.” Aaron turned back to the door at Sophia’s excited voice. Miss Baxter could wait, for now his daughter was all that mattered. He exited the carriage as she ran toward him. The moment she came into reach, he swept her into his arms spinning her in a circle before dropping a kiss on her cheek.

“I missed you so much, Daddy.” Sophia smiled up at him.

He hugged her closer. “I missed you exceedingly too, Poppet.”

“Did you bring me anything?” Sophia’s attention turned to the carriage. “Who is that lady, Daddy?” She looked at him, her eyes brimming with curiosity and excitement.

Aaron glanced at the coach, his gaze trailing over the woman filling the doorway. What if she presented a danger to his daughter? He knew nothing of her other than that she did not belong here. And that she came to be at his home in the most outlandish way.

Miss Baxter smiled at him as his footman assisted her from the carriage causing his irritation spiked. Did she truly intend to stay?

Lowering Sophia to the ground, Aaron determined to send Miss Baxter packing. He’d simply put her back in the coach and instruct his driver to take her wherever she wished to go. With long strides, he walked back across the pebbled drive.

“Miss Baxter, I fear you cannot remain here. If you will kindly get back in the carriage my driver will be pleased to take you elsewhere.”

“Your Grace, might I have a meal before you send me away? It has been a very long day and I am famished.” She glanced at the house then back to him.

Sophia tugged at his coattails before he could answer. “Daddy, won’t you introduce me to your new friend?” She beamed up at him with the excitement only a child could muster.

Aaron stared down at his daughter’s glowing face not at all sure how he should proceed. Miss Baxter was clearly in need of sustenance and Sophia was beyond excited at the possibility of having company.

Could he disappoint them both by sending Miss Baxter away without so much as a meal? What sort of gentleman would that make him?

“I am Miss Emma Baxter.” She reached her hand out to Sophia. “And who do I have the pleasure of introducing myself to?”

Sophia took her hand, her eyes dancing as a small giggle escaped her. “Lady Sophia, ma’am. Do say you are staying for the evening meal?”

“I am afraid that decision is your Papa’s to make,”—Miss Baxter turned her violet eyes on him—, “though I would be pleased to dine with you if he sees fit to invite me.”

Sophia’s pleading blue gaze locked on him. “Daddy, do say she can stay. Please. Pretty please with crumpets on top.”

Aaron’s resistance faded under his daughter’s pleas. Resigned he proffered his arm to Miss Baxter. “I would be honored if you would consent to join us.”

“The honor is all mine, Your Grace.” She took his proffered arm while Sophia grabbed his free hand.

He inhaled a cleansing breath as he led them toward the house. All would be fine. It was only a meal after all. What harm could come of it?



Emma sat to the duke’s left across from Lady Sophia. She’d been given a room to freshen up in, along with a bath before coming down to dinner. The duke had even sent a maid to assist her. To her chagrin, the maid had taken her wrinkled, dusty gown to launder and given her a new frock to wear down to super.

"Is your room to your liking, Miss Baxter?" Lady Sophia asked.

"It is a lovely room, thank you."

The girl smiled. "I picked it out special for you."

"You did?" Emma smiled back at her. "Well you did a splendid job."

"Daddy says I am not to pry, but I cannot stop myself. Won't you consider spending the night? I do so love the idea of having a lady's company."

Emma watched as the duke fairly choked on his wine. "Miss Baxter has places to be, Sophia."

"On the contrary, I have no commitments," Emma said in a rush.

She felt terribly out of place in such a grand home yet safer and better cared for than she had in weeks. If only she could stay—even for a few nights—she might be able to come up with a more permanent solution to her problems.

"Wonderful. Then you will stay as my guest if not Daddy's." Lady Sophia sipped a spoonful of soup.

Rather than consent to the girl's wishes, as bad as she wanted to do just that, Emma looked to the duke for direction. He sat stone still, a blaze in the depths of his sky-blue eyes. Would the duke take pity on her if she revealed her situation to him?

She sat her water glass aside and studied him at the head of the table. He might sympathize, might even offer to protect her, but what if he saw her as a danger? She simply could not risk being tossed out tonight. Not when Lady Sophia had invited her to stay. She'd be gone soon enough at any rate.

Giving the duke what she hoped was a sympathetic look, she shrugged her shoulders as if to say, 'sorry but what would you have me do'. Emma was about to turn her attention back to Lady Sophia when the duke gave a nod of what Emma hoped was consent. She smiled at him, then looked at the girl, "I would be honored to stay as your guest, Lady Sophia."

Emma ate her fill of each course, soup, fish, fowl...as Lady Sophia chatted about a myriad of topics. Everything from fashion to favorite pastimes and deserts was covered by the time the meal concluded. She enjoyed listening to, and chatting, with Lady Sophia a great deal. The girl's exuberance and innocents proved infectious. And Emma's mood had been lightened a great deal, her worries somehow lessened during the meal, as a result of Lady Sophia's good cheer.

She placed a bite of sherbet into her mouth and relished the way it melted on her tongue. When had she had such a delectable treat? Certainly never at Uncle Silas's home, perhaps her parents had given her such sweets? She could not recall.

"Daddy?" Lady Sophia sat down her spoon, a serious expression

overcoming her heart-shaped face. "I have something I must confess."

The duke swallowed, setting his wine glass aside. "Do have out with it, Poppet."

Emma's curiosity peaked at the girl's words, though she did her best not to look overly eager as it seemed like a private moment.

Lady Sophia averted her gaze for a moment, bringing her hand up to cover a small grin. "Mrs. Dowerly says you will be very upset, but I told her you would understand."

Emma pushed her desert around in the crystal bowl, pretending to eat rather than invade on Lady Sophia's confession. Though, in truth, she was riveted. What could the small girl have done?

The duke nodded, his gaze on his daughter. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, you see, I never meant to upset Miss Farthington." Sophia reached for her glass.

"What has your governess to do with it?" The duke's eyebrows knitted together.

"Everything, I am afraid." Lady Sophia gave a coquettish look.

"How so?"

Lady Sophia brushed a golden curl from her cheek. "I only meant to play a joke when I put the frog in her shoe."

"You put a frog in Miss Farthington's shoe?" The duke chuckled.

Sophia smirked. "I did, however, Miss Farthington found no amusement in it. She packed her bags and left." Sophia had the good sense to look ashamed. "She said I would have to get a new governess. One who did not mind unruly girls who belonged in barns rather than estate houses."

The duke's face flamed, his eyes fairly glowing.

Emma's throat grew tight with worry. Lady Sophia had not done anything out of the norm for a child her age. Surely the duke did not mean to punish her. She caught the Lady Sophia's gaze and offered a sympathetic smirk.

"Your Grace, if I may say something in Lady Sophia's defense."

The duke turned to Emma. "My daughter needs no defending." His tone cut through her like shards of broken glass.

"But surely you can see how wrong this Miss Farthington was to act in such a way." Emma stared into his eyes, besieging him. When the ire faded from their blue depth and humor took root, she arched a brow in confusion. Was he laughing at her?

"I am not at all cross with Sophia. It is the governess whose neck I'd like to wring. The nerve of the woman...speaking to my daughter in such a way."

"Truly, Daddy?" Lady Sophia sprung from her chair, going to the duke's side.

“Truly.” He scouted his chair away from the table, then pulled Lady Sophia onto his lap. “You are a gem, Poppet. I did far worse things as a boy then put a frog in someone’s shoe, and you would have to do far worse to incite my anger as well.” He tapped her nose with his finger tip and she giggled.

Sobering, Lady Sophia said, “But I do not have a governess now?”

“I will find you a new one. A better, kinder, and smarter governess.” The duke brushed the curls away from the girl’s forehead. “One who deserves the honor of your company.”

Emma’s heart melted at the tender scene and an idea formed in her mind. She could be Lady Sophia’s governess. How wonderful it would be to stay here and spend her time with the girl. Her heart seemed to lighten as she smiled at the duke.

“Your Grace, might I have a word with you...in private?” Emma asked, for she had no wish to excite the girl when she had no idea whether or not the duke would accept her in the position.

He nodded then dropped a kiss on Lady Sophia’s head. “Off with you. I will be by to tuck you in later.”

The girl smiled and jumped from his lap. “I am counting on it, Daddy,” she said, as she made her way out of the dining room.

The duke retrieved his wine glass, then settled back in his chair. “You have my attention, Miss Baxter.”

“I did not want to back you against a corner by mentioning anything infant of Lady Sophia.” She blinked causing her eyelashes to flutter.

“Go on.” The duke notched his chin.

“I could not help but hear that she needs a new governess. I am an educated woman who happens to find the lady delightful and am in need of employment.” She bestowed a bright smile on him. “I would be honored to fill the position, Your Grace.”

“You have experience as a governess?” The duke studied her, caution etched in the fine lines around his eyes.

“Well, no, not exactly.” She rushed to continue. “Though I am well versed in arithmetic, literature, and science, as well as dance and needlepoint.... To name a few things. And I am confident in my abilities.” Emma fought the urge to fiddle with her skirts as she remained focused on the duke. “Do say you will allow me the chance to prove myself.”

His Grace massaged the back of his neck, his eyes closing for a moment before meeting her gaze again. “It is late. Let us revisit the possibility in the morning.”

Emma’s heart sank, but what could she do? It would serve no purpose to argue with him. She nodded. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

Chapter 3

Aaron sat behind his large mahogany desk in his private office, a contract resting on the hard surface when a rapping came at the door. “Enter.”

He had spent countless hours tossing and turning last night as he thought about Miss Baxter and her offer as well as how she’d come to be in his carriage. Now he wished to get on with their meeting.

One thing was for certain, Sophia was smitten with the woman. Last night when Aaron had taken her the doll he’d bought, she’d hardly paid mind to it as she rushed to ask him if Miss Baxter could stay for a spell. Sophia went on to tell him that she found Miss Baxter to be a lovely lady and wished to become better acquainted with her. Big words for a seven year old—and they went right to his heart.

Miss Baxter stepped into the office, closing the door behind her.

“Please sit.” Aaron indicated a chair. He watched the subtle sway of her hips as she crossed the room to sit in the high-back leather chair. She was a beautiful woman, the kind that could bring a man to his knees if he were not careful.

She folded her hands on her lap and met his gaze, her violet eyes cautious. “Good morning, Your Grace.”

He smiled on impulse. “Good morning, Miss Baxter.” He could easily understand why his daughter liked the woman as she did. Since Sophia’s mother ran off with her lover, she’d not had a young, pretty woman around to spend time with. Her nanny had served as his nanny and was now quite advanced in years. The same was true of the house keeper, old governess, and cook.

Dismissing his musings, he focused on the task at hand. “I asked you here so that we could further discuss the possibility of you becoming Lady Sophia’s governess.”

Miss Baxter beamed, the worry he’d recognized in her gaze faded away. “I would be honored.”

“Very well.” He tugged at his cravat not at all certain he was doing the right thing. After all, he knew nothing of the woman. That would change here and now. “First I must know more about your

background. Where do you hail from? Where did you receive your education?"

"My aunt and uncle raised me for most of my years. Aunt Charlotte taught me everything I needed to know in order to do well in life, and be able to mix with the higher classes. She always said it was imperative for a lady to be well educated, though one must never wear it openly, and to perfect the things expected of women."

He settled back into his plush leather chair. "Your aunt sounds like a smart woman, though I disagree with keeping ones intelligence hidden. I wish for my daughter to be proud of her learning and abilities."

"Aunt Charlotte *was* a smart woman indeed. She has passed on to her final reward." A small frown pulled at Miss Baxter's bow-shaped lips.

"I am sorry to hear it. I think I would have liked her."

"I do not doubt that you would. Lady Sophia would as well. Your daughter is a delightful young woman and I agree with you, Your Grace, she should be happy to show off her brain as much, or more so, than her pretty face."

The more they talked the more he relaxed. Regardless of how the woman came to be at his house, she seemed to belong. Furthermore, she was well spoken and conducted herself as a lady should. She'd told him she was well versed in the areas a governess must be, and she liked his daughter. He could find no reason not to hire her.

Aaron tapped the contract resting on the desk in front of him. "Have a look and let me know your thoughts." He slid it toward Miss Baxter who lifted it from the polished surface and began to read.

After she reached the end of the contract she laid it back on the desk then looked up at him. "It is a generous offer, Your Grace. I am pleased to agree with all the terms you've laid out, except for one."

He arched a brow in surprise for he could not imagine what she might disagree with. The contract included every provision he could think of right down to a new wardrobe and time away from the estate for personal matters and relaxation. He held her stare and asked, "Which might that be?"

"I am an accomplished singer and therefore have no need of attending Lady Sophia's singing lessons. In fact, I should like to instruct her myself."

Not an unreasonable concession. That is if the woman truly was accomplished. "Let me hear a sample of your skills."

"As you wish." Miss Baxter stood with her posture straight though not at all stiff. She drew in a breath then belted out the first lines of Robin Adair. "*What's this doll town to me? Robins not near...*"

When she reached the end of the first stanza she stopped and

smiled at him.

He had become lost in her voice, mesmerized. Miss Baxter had sung like a nightingale. He could listen to her for the rest of his days and never cease to be held in awe of her skill.

Bloody hell, by the time she reached the second line of the song, he had become completely captivated.

He reached for the contract and struck through the bit about Sophia's singing lessons, then inserted that Miss Baxter alone would be responsible for her instruction. By the time he had made the change, he'd recovered his wits and turned his attention back to Miss Baxter. "That was lovely indeed." He dipped the quill in ink and offered it to her.

"Thank you." In a smooth and fluid motion of swirls and lines, Miss Baxter signed the contract. She angled her head, bringing her attention back to him. "I would like to start immediately."

Aaron grinned at her enthusiasm. "Then allow me to take you on a tour of the house and most importantly, familiarize you with the school room. Once we have finished, you can begin your instruction."

She nodded, rising to her feet. He came around the desk and offered his arm. When she rested her gloved hand on his coat sleeve a wave of longing passed through him. He'd wanted to reach over and cover her hand with his, but he resisted the urge instead leading her from the room. As they made their way down the corridor, he pointed out the various rooms they passed, stopping to peek into each one.

Miss Baxter asked him questions about the staff, the pictures on the walls, and the collection of leather-bound novels in the library. By the time they reached the private family drawing room the two of them were chatting like old acquaintances. He could not help but relax in her presence, and given his experience with beautiful women that terrified him.

He swallowed back his worries and led her toward the door. "This is the family parlor where we spend much of our time together." He guided her into the room, stopping to gaze at his daughter who sat with her nanny at a table near the fire place.

Sophia looked up with a wide smile. "Daddy! Miss Baxter! Come see my drawing."

Miss Baxter moved her hand from his arm and crossed the room to look at Sophia's picture. "How lovely, Lady Sophia." Miss Baxter pointed at the parchment. "I can tell that this is you and your daddy." She trailed her finger up to the top of the drawing. "Who is this?"

Sophia angled her head up, meeting Miss Baxter's gaze. "That is mama, she's an angel."

Aaron came to stand behind his daughter. He rested a hand on her small shoulder and looked at the parchment before her. She'd drawn a

garden with cobbled paths and flowering bushes. He stood beside her, holding her hand on a path as they both gazed at the bright sky. His dead wife rested on a cloud, her wings spread and halo glistening. His chest tightened, not for her but for their daughter.

“Daddy, do you like it?” Sophia asked.

Aaron swallowed past the tightness in his throat. “You are a wonderful artist, Poppet.”

Her smile grew larger, lighting her eyes. “Good. I thought you might hang it in your office or bedchamber.” She shaded in a colorless flower then held the drawing out to him.

He hesitated a moment before reaching for it. “Might you rather hang it in your room?”

Sophia averted her gaze, her expression crestfallen. “You do not like it.”

“On the contrary,” Aaron said, searching for words to erase the hurt he’d caused. What a bloody fool he was when it came to his daughter’s grief. Still he could not help but be angry when his deceased wife entered their lives. She had no place in Sophia’s heart after what she’d done to them.

Miss Baxter reached out for the picture. “May I?”

Aaron allowed her to take it from his hand. She made a great show of studying the drawing and complementing Sophia on her skill. “I think this would be perfect in the school room. Then your mama would be watching you as you learn and grow. I just know she would be proud.”

“But I do not have a governess to teach me.” Sophia looked to Aaron, a small twinkle of good cheer back in her blue gaze.

“Oh but you do. Miss Baxter has agreed to fill the position.”

Sophia’s eyes took on their usual sparkle as she turned to Miss Baxter.

“And I would be honored if you would consent to hang your art in the school room.”

“Let us do so now.” Sophia jumped from her seat and grabbed Miss Baxter’s hand.

Miss Baxter smiled. “So long as your daddy does not object.”

He grinned at them. “Not in the least. We can continue our tour on the morrow. Meet me in the foyer after breaking your fast and I will show you the grounds before Sophia’s lessons.”

Aaron watched as the pair left the room hand in hand. Perhaps Miss Baxter would be good for his daughter. The way she had handled the drawing and seemed to sympathize with both him and Sophia spoke volumes to her character.

She’d proven herself to be a compassionate woman even if she held a secret. None-the-less, he had to get to the bottom of said secrets. He

could not go on blind faith that she was trustworthy and safe to be around his daughter.

Tomorrow he would ask her how she'd come to be in his carriage as he'd meant to do today. God willing her answer would not make him regret allowing her close to his daughter.

Chapter 4

Emma had spent a great deal of time pondering Lady Sophia's drawing since yesterday. She felt bird-witted for not asking after the girl's mother. In truth the thought had never crossed her mind. She'd been far too concerned with her own well being.

She angled her head, looking at the duke from beneath the brim of her bonnet. "I hope I did not overstep yesterday. I must admit to being caught off guard by Lady Sophia's drawing."

The duke led her onto a shaded garden path. "Not at all. I should have told you about my wife's passing."

Emma shook her head. "No, the fault is mine as it never occurred to me to ask after your wife and it most certainly should have. How long has she been gone?"

The duke released a breath. "Six months."

Emma gasped then pressed her lips together the stifle her shock. The family should be in morning yet there were no signs of it. Why? She glanced at their surroundings not at all sure what to say next for it would be rude of her to pry into his personal affairs. Still, what sort of man did not grieve the death of his wife?

"Let us sit and I will explain." The duke brought her to a cast iron bench under a lime tree. It's umbrella of leaves casting them in shade.

She lowered herself onto the cool surface then smoothed her skirts as she waited for him to go on.

He positioned himself beside her but kept his attention trained elsewhere as he looked straight ahead out into the garden. "My wife died six months ago, but she has been gone from us since Sophia was five years of age."

"I'm sorry." The words hardly seemed sufficient. Emma plucked at her skirt, hoping he had more to tell her as she still did not understand his reasoning.

"Do not be. I have no grief for her loss." He turned to Emma, a mixture of anger and relief in his gaze. "She was a heartless woman who abandoned us for her lover. They ran off to France and she never looked back. She never sent so much a letter asking after Sophia's well

being.”

Emma’s heart hitched for the pain both the duke and Lady Sophia had experienced. After all, her own father had done much the same thing to her when he’d abandoned her, selling her to Uncle Silas and Aunt Charlotte.

“When I received word that she had met her end, I felt relief for it meant she could not show back up in our lives, bring more hurt on our daughter.”

Emma reached for his hand and gave a little squeeze. “I understand, better than you might think. My father abandoned me after my mother passed away. That is how I came to live with my aunt and uncle.”

He gave a sympathetic smirk. “I worry about Sophia growing up without a mother. But at least now, she will never have to know that her mother choose not to be with her.”

“Indeed, there is a small blessing in that.” Emma offered a comforting grin. “Lady Sophia is a delightful girl. Smart and sweet. Any woman should be proud to call her daughter.”

“I take it the lessons are going well, then?”

“Indeed. There is nothing I have taught her that she has not taken right to. Of course we have just begun, but I am optimistic. You have done a wonderful job with her, Your Grace. Don’t ever doubt it.”

His lips twitched. “Will you feel the same when her mischievous side makes an appearance?”

“Absolutely.” Emma grinned. “In fact I am looking forward to her antics.”

He stood then helped her to her feet. “I somehow doubt the truth of your words.”

“Never doubt my sincerity, Your Grace.” She angled her head, giving him an amused glance. “Children are wonderful. They keep us young and bring laughter into our lives.”

Emma allowed him to lead her back onto the trail, tipping her chin up to feel the sun on her face when they came out of the shade.

“Would you laugh if you found a frog in your shoe?” He asked, his eyes sparkling.

“Yes.”

“What if you found a wild creature in your room? Say a fawn or pheasant.”

She laughed. “I would give it a name and make it a pet.”

“You would not.” He joined in her merriment, chuckling as he swept her onto a new path.

“I most certainly would.”

“And if you discovered your favorite frock had been rolled in mud?”

She attempted to appear serious, drawing her eyebrows together. "I would make mud pies."

The duke patted her hand, grinning. "I do believe you will fit in perfectly here."

Emma gazed at him. "Thank—" Her slipper caught on something and she tripped, her heart skipping a beat as his grace pulled her into his arms.

He held her tight against him in a protective embrace. "I have you." He stared into her eyes as he brought his lips to hers.

Heat fanned through Emma at the gentle pressure of his lips on hers. Like a perfect hoyden she wrapped her arms around his neck and angled her head inviting him to deepen the kiss.

The duke accepted her wonton invitation, sliding his tongue into her inviting mouth. He was so close, so warm, her head swam, heart pounding as desire pooled in her midsection. She gave as well as she got, clinging to him, forgetting herself in his arms.

As suddenly as she'd been pulled against him, he set her aside breaking their connection, all of the humor gone from his expression as he looked at her apologetically. "I should not have taken advantage of your close proximity. If you will excuse me, I will leave you to your lessons." The duke bowed, turned on his heels and left Emma watching as he strolled away.



Aaron sat in the family parlor, his feet stretched out before him

as he watched Sophia play on the floor nearby with the doll he'd brought her from London. He would do anything to see his daughter well adjusted and happy. It was, for that very reason, he'd hired Miss...the hell with it, Emma, to be here governess. Why the devil had he kissed the woman? He rubbed his neck, averting his attention to the fire crackling in the hearth. Had he learned nothing from Sophia's mother?

Beautiful, young women brought nothing but betrayal and chaos. They used men to gain what they wanted then destroyed them before moving on. He could not become entangled with Emma, would not allow himself or Sophia to get hurt again.

He glanced back down at his daughter who wore a look of concentration as she played with the dolls golden locks. Sophia was smitten. He sighed. They were already at risk. He could no more deny

his attraction to Emma than Sophia's attachment to the woman.

Emma had gotten to them—captivated them.

Hell he'd spent the whole day between thinking about the memory of her lips on his, wanting more of her, and trying to forget what had happened. Emma had turned him upside down, charmed him from almost the moment they'd met and ignited his passion with her kiss.

He glanced at the door when the sound of footfalls intruded on his thoughts and his pulse speed up. Emma strolled into the room, her hips swaying, hair shining in the candle light, and face glowing. Bloody hell, he was in trouble.

"Miss Baxter. Do say you will read to me?" Sophia laid her doll on the settee and reached for the book on the table beside it.

A thread of unease spiraled through him. Should he say something to her? Leave the room, perhaps? He watched as Emma moved to sit beside Sophia. Taking the book she opened it and began reading. When Sophia curled up beside her, Emma wrapped one arm protectively around her and all thought fled Aaron's mind as he watched them.

Miss Emma Baxter was nothing like his dead wife.

Sophia's mother had not had a maternal bone in her whole body. Hell a pack of wolves would have made a better mother to Sophia than his wife ever had. Furthermore, Emma was not demanding, she was gentle and kind, as well as fun to be around in ways his wife never had been.

It was not fair of him to compare the two women and he'd not do it anymore. Besides, he and Emma were not courting. She was his employee—nothing more. Aaron relaxed into the chair and allowed himself to be carried away in the story she read. Her voice wrapping him in serenity the likes of which he had not felt in a long time.

"Your Grace." He opened his eyes, turning his head toward the nanny's voice as Emma stopped reading.

"I have come to take Lady Sophia to bed."

"I will tuck her in this night." Aaron rose, stretching his neck and shoulders. "Come along, Poppet."

Sophia reached out and hugged Emma. "Good night."

He watched his heart melting as Emma wrapped a protective arm around his daughter.

"Good night, Princess." She dropped a kiss on Sophia's forehead further endearing herself to him.

The tender moment brought a tear to his eye for he could plainly see the bond that had formed between the two—and in such a short time. There was no doubt Emma cared for Sophia regardless of how she'd come to be in his carriage, and a woman who held such a deep regard for a child that did not come from her own womb had to be a

good woman.

In that moment, he resolved to protect and care for Emma come what may.

She released Sophia and the pair stood. "I am for bed as well. Good night, Your Grace."

"And to you as well," he said, as he scooped Sophia into his arms.

When he reached Sophia's bedchamber, he waited outside the door as her maid helped her into her night clothes. Once she was ready, he laid her on her featherbed then pulled her pink duvet over her small body, tucking in the edges around her just the way she liked. "Sleep well, Poppet."

Sophia stared up at him. "Daddy, will I ever have a mama?"

"You do have a mama. She simply lives with the angels." His heart ached for his daughter, but there was nothing he could do other than love her himself. He bent to kiss her.

Sophia placed her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. "I mean a new mama. One who lives here with us?"

He swallowed past the tightness in his throat. "Perhaps, someday."

She smiled, releasing his face to settle against her pillow. "I should rather like for Miss Emma to be my mama."

Aaron grinned half in amusement and half because he did not know what else to do. "Sweet dreams, little one." He delivered the kiss he'd intended before she had waylaid him, then left the room with a heavy heart.

Chapter 5

Emma should not be standing here, outside of Lady Sophia's door.

Nonetheless, she had to pass the girls bedchamber in order to reach her own. When she heard the girl's question, she could not stop herself from pausing to listen. Now her heart ached for Sophia and the pain she understood all too well herself.

What she would not give to heal the wound Sophia's mother created with her selfish actions. She hoped the woman passed away feeling some measure of guilt and regret for she deserved no less.

Emma took a couple of steps toward her chamber then froze at the girls next words, *'I should rather like for Miss Emma to be my mama'*. Bless her little soul. Tears formed in Emma's eyes and she squeezed them shut in an effort to keep from crying. No child should have to grow up without parents to cherish and spoil them.

Opening her eyes, Emma resolved to be as much like a mother to Lady Sophia as her position would allow. She drew a deep breath knowing she would never be able to erase the girls hurt, but perhaps she could ease it a bit. Regardless, she would do all she could.

The door to Sophia's room pushed opened, the duke stepping out into the hall.

Emma jumped, her heart skipping a beat. Drat! She'd been so distracted in her thoughts that she'd not heard the duke's footfalls. "I did not mean to eavesdrop. It is just...well I was—" Good heaven's her face burned.

"She is young and knows not what she says." He averted his gaze to the plush carpeting they stood upon.

"Do accept my apologies. It was not my intent to spy on your private moment." She started down the hall, wishing she could sink into the carpet and disappear.

He reached for her, capturing her elbow. "I do not wish for there to be awkwardness between us."

Emma met his stare, offering a warm smile. "Lady Sophia is a lovely child. Any woman should be pleased to call her their daughter."

Before she could react, his Grace pulled her against him, bringing

their lips together.

Her stomach fluttered as passion spread through her. When his tongue met hers, she melted in his arms, giving herself fully.

He eased back, breaking their kiss but not releasing her.

Emma's heart beat in a rough staccato, every bit of her fighting a craving the likes of which she'd never experienced. She licked her lower lip, staring at him. Waiting to discover what he would do next.

"We must talk." He released her and proffered an arm.

Not what she had wanted nor expected, she hid her disappointment by glancing down the hall. She arrived in his private parlor with her heart still pounding, and lowered herself onto a wingback chair.

He sat opposite her then leaned forward and took her hands in his. The heat between them threatened to turn her into ash as she waiting for him to speak.

"It does not escape me that I know almost nothing about you. Most concerning, I do not know how you came to be hiding in my coach." He stared at her with sympathetic eyes. "You can trust me, Emma."

Her eyes widened at the use of her given name and she attempted to pull back her hands.

He held on, rubbing small circles on the backs of her hands with the pads of his thumbs. "It is my wish to protect you. However, I cannot do so if I do not understand the danger you are in."

The more he talked, the harder she found it to breath. Dare she tell him her secret? What if she did and he cast her out? She never should have hid in that blasted carriage. Now she cared deeply for Lady Sophia and could not deny an attachment to the duke as well. If he sent her away it would bring more heartache for Lady Sophia and it would be all Emma's fault.

"Trust me." He smiled, fine lines forming at the edges of his eyes.

Emma inhaled then let her breath out slow. "I told you about my father abandoning me and my aunt's passing."

He nodded, continuing to rub her hands, to reassure her with his gaze.

"What I did not share with you was that my uncle is deep in debt."

Rap, rap, rap.

Irritation clouded the duke's warm gaze as he let go of her hands. "Hold your thought. I will get rid of whoever it is."

She released a breath, grateful for the interruption, then averted her gaze to the closed door.

"Enter," the duke said.

A maid opened the door, sticking her head into the room. "Lady Sophia asked for you, my lord. She is restless and a bit out of sorts."

He rubbed the back of his neck, closing his eyes for a moment,

then stood.

The woman shrank back into the hall, closing the door in her wake.

The duke leveled his gaze on Emma. "I must go to her."

"Of course, Your Grace."

He stepped closer and placed his hand on her shoulder. "You have leave to call me Aaron."

She angled her head to look at him. "Aaron." His name left her lips barley a whisper, and though she'd never spoken it before, it felt comfortable on her tongue.

. "We will finish this conversation on the marrow." He patted her shoulder before moving toward the door.

She sank back against the chair as she watched him take his leave of the parlor. What would he think of her once he knew her secret? What would he do? She closed her eyes, pushing away the worry. There would be time enough for that tomorrow.



Aaron strode down the hallway toward Sophia's room, his mind racing. He adored his daughter, but bloody hell parenting was hard work. He had to discover Emma's past in order to protect not only her, but also Sophia—and himself. Each day that past without him knowing how she came o be hidden in his coach presented more danger to them all.

Emma had told him her uncle was destitute. Worse, he was deep in debt. Had she hid in his carriage hoping to somehow entrap or swindle him? Perhaps the passion in her kisses was a farce meant to bring him to heal.

No. She'd not have told him about her uncle's debt if she had meant to swindle or trap him in order to pay the accounts. But what then? He massaged the back of his neck as he continued along the hall. Perhaps she truly sought a paid position so that she might be able to help the man who raised her?

Turning the corner leading to Sophia's bedchamber, he hurried his pace. Hiding in his carriage would be an odd way to go about securing a job, however the idea held more merit than his previous pondering.

After all, a destitute woman would not be able to hire a carriage of any kind. Even a mail coach would be above her means. Regardless, he did not believe such a compassionate woman capable of taking

advantage of him—and certainly not of Sophia.

Reaching the room, he stepped in and went to Sophia's side. "What is the matter, Poppet?" he asked.

She sniffled, wiping away a tear. "I'm lonely. Will you stay with me for a while, Daddy?"

"Of course." He settled into the pink and grey brocade chair beside her bed. "Now close your eyes, darling."

She fluttered her long golden lashes. "Thank you."

He reached out to stroke her hair. "Go to sleep. I will stay right here. You have my word."

She rubbed the corner of her blanket between her tiny fingers. "As a gentleman?"

"Yes, as a gentleman." Her eyes closed as he continued to smooth the hair on the top of her head. He sighed, releasing the stress of his day as he watched her relax, his own eyes growing heavy.

Sometime later, Aaron woke to bright rays of sunshine streaming through sheer pink curtains. Somehow he'd managed to sleep the entire night in Sophia's chair. He straightened stretching his stiff muscles, then glanced at her empty bed before peering out the window at the sun's orb well above the horizon. It must be after breakfast time.

Pushing his tasseled hair into place, he left the room in search of Sophia. He peaked into the playroom, family parlor, and school room before coming upon Sophia's nanny in a corridor. "Where has Lady Sophia gotten off to this morning?"

The nanny dipped into a curtsy. "She is in the kitchen with Miss Baxter, Your Grace."

He offered a nod then made his way toward the kitchen. Sophia had never been in that particular room before and he could not imagine why she was now—not that it bothered him. He was merely curious.

Sophia's sweet chatter greeted his ears before she came into view. He stopped to watch her and Miss Emma as they stood behind a counter, both wearing aprons, their faces marked with streaks of white flour.

"Now add three eggs," Emma instructed.

Sophia reached for one large brown egg before tapping it against the metal bowl and dropping its slimy contents into the bowl's depth. "One." She reached for another, repeating the process. "Two." Then again. "Three." She looked at Emma, her nose wrinkled in consternation. "I still see a solid."

"Patients, Princess. Add a cup of water to the mix."

Sophia did as instructed before turning her gaze back on Emma. "The liquid is mostly sitting on top of the solid now."

“Indeed it is. Give it a stir.” Emma handed Sophia a whisk.

Sophia stuck the mettle mixing instrument into the bowl and gave a stir splashing liquid over the sides. She bit her lower lip, turning to Emma.

“Worry not.” Emma stepped behind Sophia covering her hand with her own and guiding Sophia’s movements. “Mixing is a tricky science. I often splash the contents around myself. There now, you are doing wonderfully.”

Aaron observed as Sophia’s eyes rounded, her smile magnifying. “I did it, Miss Baxter! The whole thing is a liquid.”

“Indeed you did. You’re a marvelous kitchen scientist.” Emma removed her hand from Sophia’s and stepped back beside her. “Are you ready to observe what happens when we heat the batter?”

Aaron stared in wonderment at Emma’s teaching techniques. He’d never seen a governess or tutor of any kind utilize such methods. And what fun Sophia appeared to be having. It was no wonder she picked up on Emma’s lessons so easily when the woman made learning fun and interesting.

“Yes. And I have a theory. A hypothesis that is.” Sophia sat the whisk on the counter. “It will become a solid.”

“What a smart little lady you are.” Emma slid a baking dish closer to the bowl.

Pride spread through him at his daughter’s wit and accomplishment. At the same time his heart warmed further in regard to Emma. Every time he witnessed her with his daughter more of the thick veneer surrounding his heart chipped away.

Sophia grinned, mischief glinting in her eyes. “No, I have merely eaten lots of cake.”

Emma laughed. “And you shall eat more soon.”

Fighting his own laughter, Aaron cleared his throat as he walked further into the kitchen. “What is this I hear about cake?”

“Daddy!” Sophia wiped her flour covered hands on her apron. “The cake was supposed to be a surprise.”

“Then I will remove myself and pretend as though I never came upon you.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead before offering Emma a grin.

“Go now. Hurry, for if you stay too long you may not be able to forget.” Sophia waved toward the door.

With a chuckle, Aaron did he bidding leaving them to their lesson. His conversation with Emma would have to wait for later. There was nothing for it.

Chapter 6

Emma stepped into the foyer, started at the sight of the men standing just inside, then froze. Uncle Silas and Lord Windham stared back at her. How had they found her? What would they do? Good God, she'd not told Aaron the whole truth, yet. Her heart somersaulted. Now there would be no time.

Before she could determine what to do, Uncle Silas stepped forward and took hold of her arm and yanked her toward the door. "You have had your fun. Now it is time you do your duty."

Emma pulled her arm back, attempting to gain her freedom. "Release me." She turned defiant eyes on him. "Let go, or I'll scream. I swear I will."

"I could not care less if you do. I am your guardian and you are betrothed to Windham. You belong to us." He said, his tone low, dangerous.

She shrank back like a cornered animal, digging her heels in as he pulled her toward the door. "No. You can't—"

"Shut your stupid mouth before we shut it for you." Lord Windham took her other arm, helping Uncle Silas to propel her toward the door while Aaron's butler watched with wide eyes.

Knowing not what else to do, Emma released a blood curdling scream. Perhaps Aaron would not save her, maybe he would not, but she had to try. She could not allow Uncle Silas to take her and marry her to Windham without a fight. Now mere feet from the door, she screamed again, so loud that it made her ears ring.

Uncle Silas slapped his hand over her mouth, tugging her harder.

Her heart beat so hard she feared it might explode causing her to perish on the spot. A fate she'd prefer over becoming Lord Windham's wife. "Do not let them take me," she yelled at the butler, desperation plain in her voice.

The butler found his courage and slammed the door shut, stepping in front of it. "I am afraid you will have to speak with His Grace before you are allowed to remove Miss Baxter."

Lord Windham let go of her only to grab the butler by his lapels,

pushing him against the door. "You do not give me orders."

"What is the meaning of this?" Aaron stepped into view.

She moved her gaze to the floor boards when he moved to stand in front of them, his face all hard lines and anger, though she recognized a flicker of betrayal glinting in his eyes.

He ripped Uncle Silas's hands from her, turning the man to face him. "Explain yourself."

Uncle Silas squared his shoulders, notched his chin. "Miss Baxter is my niece and I am her guardian. Further, she is betrothed to Lord Windham. I have every right to take her back and enforce the contract we signed."

Aaron met Emma's gaze causing her heart to tumble.

She stared back, her lower lip quivering, hands shaking. "Please." It was all she could do to speak the word to him and she desperately hoped it was enough to persuade him.

He turned back to Uncle Silas. "I am afraid you have it all wrong. Emma belongs to me now."

Lord Windham came forward, his face flaming red. "That is impossible."

Aaron strolled over to her with long confident strides then put a secure arm around her. "We are wed."

"I don't believe you." Lord Windham sputtered, looking to Uncle Silas. "He is lying."

"Afraid not old chap. We were married under special license from the Arch Bishop of Canterbury himself."

Lord Windham pulled back his fist. "You lying son of a bitch."

Aaron released Emma catching Lord Windham's fist in his hand. He squeezed it as he walked the man toward the door. "You have overstayed your welcome."

The butler opened the large oak door and Aaron propelled Lord Windham through it before turning to Uncle Silas. "Will you be kind enough to remove yourself, or shall I do it for you?"

Uncle Silas hastily took his exit. The butler slamming the door in his wake.

"Thank you." Emma raced to Aaron's side. "You have done me a great service."

He turned to her, his eyes still clouded with anger and betrayal.

Her heart hitched at the knowledge she had caused his upset. "I will leave at once." She fought the tears rising in her eyes as she started toward the stairs.

"Wait."

Emma glanced back at Aaron, her pulse pounding.

"It is not my wish for you to leave." He closed his eyes. "Leastwise not yet."

She nodded, a tiny flicker of hope sparking within her.

He placed his hand on the small of her back and led her through a nearby door into the public receiving room.

She lowered herself onto a settee and turned her attention to him. Waiting with bated breath. Desperately hoping for something she could not herself imagine.

He paced back and forth several times before coming to a stop in front of her. Staring down at her, he said, "I want to hear the whole story."

Emma released a breath before starting. Her words coming out in a rush, recounting everything from the day she went to live with her aunt and uncle until the day she'd hidden in his carriage. "I had nowhere to go and no money for which to care for myself. It was a hasty decision to stow away in your coach, but I did not have any other option. Uncle Silas was searching for me. I could hear him calling and his footfalls approaching. I did not think, just reacted." She held his gaze praying he would understand. "Please forgive me for not telling you sooner, and for bringing trouble to your threshold. I never meant to cause any harm."

Aaron rubbed the back of his neck in the way she'd come to know meant he was thinking, then shook his head.

"I did not mean to hurt anyone. I swear it." She pressed her lips together to stop herself from speaking further. She owed him her silence and the chance to process all that had happened.

He released a deep breath, dropping his hand from his neck. "I believe you and I do not assign any blame on you. What your uncle has done is unconscionable." He began to pace again. "But what are we to do about it now?"

She had no answer. Emma counted his steps in an effort to distract herself. *One, two, three...eleven, twelve...* Oh, what would become of her?

He pinned her beneath his stare. "You know they will return. And soon, I'll wager." He resumed his pacing.

"That is precisely why I must leave right away." Emma stood prepared to go at once.

"No. That is why we must wed."

Her eyes rounded. What? How? Did it even matter? Her mind spun. She placed her hand on his chest, stopping his pacing to stare into his eyes. "You wish to marry me?"

"Yes, right away. It is the only way to rescue you from their clutches."

She dropped her hand from his chest, instantly missing the warmth that had passed between them. "I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourself on my behalf."

“It is not a sacrifice. I am fond of you. Attracted to you even. And so is Sophia...that is, fond of you, Emma. She needs a mother. I can think of no-one better suited to the role than you.”

Emma turned the words over in her head. She did experience an undeniable pull toward him every time they found themselves together, and would never try to deny her love for Sophia, but was that enough? If she allowed him to wed her, would he be happy? Or would he soon grow to resent her?

Would a husband who detested her be any better than one who abused her? One who only wished to possess her so he could indulge his lust?

“I will go to the Arch Bishop at once.” He strolled toward the door.

She watched, her head spinning. He could be her salvation. The answer to her prayers. “No. Stop.”

He turned to her. “It is the only way.”

“That is not true. I can go elsewhere. Somewhere Uncle Silas will not be able to find me.”

“And what of Sophia? My daughter loves you. I can see it in her eyes, hear it in the things she says.” He took hold of Emma’s shoulders, studying her. “You heard her tell me that she wished for you to be her mother.”

A rogue tear left Emma’s eye, gliding down her cheek.

“Can you deny that you love her as well?”

Emma shook her head.

He wiped the tear from her cheek. “Can you deny the attraction between us? The passion in our kisses?”

“No.” Emma answered, her voice raspy.

“Nor can I.” He brought his lips to her in demonstration, kissing her until her knees threatened to give out. “Marry me, Emma. Say you will.”

The fight had left her the minute he brought his mouth to hers reducing her to a puddle of desire. All she had left to do was accept her fate. She nodded. “I will.”

Chapter 7

Aaron led his bride from the family chapel. He'd hastily gone to

London and secured the special license the very moment she consented to the union. He wasted no time upon his return taking Emma, Sophia, the nanny, and his butler to the chapel without even changing from his traveling clothes.

He had all he needed: his bride, daughter, and two witnesses along with the minister. There was no reason to delay the wedding and every reason to be hasty about it. It was not until the minister pronounced them husband and wife that he was able to relax. And now, his steps were light, his heart filled with joy, as he led Emma and Sophia from the chapel.

"Are you truly my mama?" Sophia beamed up at Emma.

Emma's own smile rivaled the sun as she knelt down to meet Sophia's gaze. "I am."

Aaron's heart nearly burst when Emma took Sophia into her embrace. His daughter would never again ache for a mother's love. For that reason alone, he believed that he and Emma would come to love each other and they would all have a happy rest of their lives, together as a family.

"And I always will be, Princess." She dropped a kiss on Sophia's head. "Now let us return to the house so that we might celebrate this most joyous of days." She kissed Sophia then released her from the embrace. "As I recall you have a surprise for your daddy."

Sophia took Emma's hand and they all continued to the carriage. A newfound pride swelled inside of Aaron as he watched the spring in Sophia's step and the glow on his wife's face. He did not quite understand how he'd come to be here, but he did know he wouldn't wish it any other way.

Sophia chatted excitedly on the short ride back to the house while Aaron sat beside Emma holding her hand. Once inside, they went to the dining room where he had ordered their wedding breakfast to be served. White and red flowers decorated the doorway, the corners of the room, and the table just as he'd instructed.

Grinning, he glanced at Emma hopping she would be pleased and the joy in her expression did not disappoint him.

“Do sit, Daddy.” Sophia quickly made her way around the grand mahogany table to find her chair.

Aaron did his daughter’s bidding, moving to take his own seat. A large covered silver platter sat in the middle near the head of the table. He glanced between it and Sophia before reaching out his hand. It must be her surprise for an entire breakfast for three would not fit in it. He took hold of the platter cover’s handle then stilled. “May I.”

“Please do.” Sophia beamed.

He lifted the cover to reveal a grand three tiered cake frosted white and decorated with ribbons and pink flowers—Sophia’s favorite color. Could it be? He looked to Sophia. “Is this the cake you made with Emma?”

“The very one.” Sophia nodded her head, her eyes brimming with excitement. “Let us try it, Daddy.”

Aaron motioned a servant forward but before he could cut the cake, another servant swept into the room.

“Your Grace.”

Aaron angled his head toward the footman who’d disturbed their celebration. “Yes.”

“I am sorry to interrupt this most joyous of occasions, however, we have an issue in the foyer that requires your immediate attention.”

Aaron nodded, then rose from his chair exchanging a knowing glance with Emma. Her Uncle and the baron had returned. It seemed they had wed just in time to prevent the men from taking Emma. He forced a worry free continence and turned to Sophia. “I shall return in a moment’s time, Poppet.”

“As will I.” Emma stood, moving toward the door. “We won’t be long.”

Sophia nodded, reached out swiping her finger into the frosting. “Do, hurry.”

When Aaron stepped into the foyer with Emma on his heels he found exactly what he’d expected. The Baron and Emma’s uncle along with a constable.

Her uncle glared at him, a stack of parchment in his hands before turning to the constable. “That is her.”

The constable stepped forward and bowed. “Your Grace, I am afraid this woman belongs to these men. She will have to leave with them.”

“But you are mistaken.” Aaron reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved their marriage certificate. With a cocky grin, he handed it to the constable. “She is legally wed to me and therefore will not be going anywhere.”

The constable drew his brows together, scrutinizing the document. His cheeks colored as he handed it back before turning to the other men. "It seems you have no claim on her."

"Bullock's," Lord Windham exclaimed. "I have a betrothal agreement."

"There is no crime in breaking a betrothal. Besides, it means nothing when the lady is already married."

"That license is a fraud. I demand you return her to me this instant." Lord Windham's face burned red. "Baxter do something this instant."

Emma's uncle stared after them, his jaw a gape.

The constable handed the license back to Aaron, then turned on Lord Windham. "I am afraid not, my lord. The document is legal and binding. They were wed this very morning by authority of the Arch Bishop of Canterbury." He placed a guiding hand on Lord Windham's arm. "You have no grounds to contest the union."

Aaron smirked in triumph. "If you will excuse us. My wife and I have much to celebrate."

The constable turned back to them and gave a bow. "Of course, Your Grace, Duchess. I am most sorry to have interrupted."

Aaron placed a protective hand on Emma's back and began leading her away.

"You will pay for this Silas! Arrest him at once." Lord Windham's shrill voice filled the space.

Emma looked back, causing Aaron to stop. He saw the sorrow in her eyes and it tugged at his heart. How could she care what happened to her uncle after what he'd put her through? The man should rot in debtor's prison for the rest of his miserable life.

He swallowed back his objections determined to see her happy. After all it was her kindhearted nature that endeared him to her. Leaning in close, Aaron asked in a low voice, "Do you wish to help him?"

She nodded, a flicker of hope passing through her gaze.

"Then consider it done." He released her and went to stand beside the constable. "There is no need to arrest anyone."

The Baron sputtered. "Ignore him. This man owes me a great debt that he is unable to settle. I demand you arrest him at once."

Aaron pulled a satchel from his pocket and flung it at the Baron. "There is your coin." He peered at Baxter. "You will never set foot near Emma again."

"I understand. Th...thank you, Your Grace."

"Do not thank me. It is Emma you owe your gratitude to. I'd have let them hang you for what you've done." He turned his back giving the cut direct and swept Emma back into the dining room. He'd not

waste one more precious moment of their lives on the nefarious me.

“We’re back, Princess,” Emma said as they strolled through the door.

“Now let us have cake,” Sophia said, a heaping piece already set before her.

“Indeed.” Emma took her chair, then lifted her fork and stuck it into the decadent slice that had been served for her.

Aaron brimmed with pride, love, and hope for their future as he joined in. Somehow, everything would fall into place. He simply knew it would.

Chapter 8

N*ine months later*

Aaron cuddle Sophia on his lap, more content than he could ever recall being in the past. As he had suspected, everything had worked itself out. Now he had more than any one man had a right too; a wonderful daughter, loving wife, more coin than most of his peers, and twins on the way. He was a lucky man indeed.

“Daddy, tell me a story.”

He grinned, bouncing her on his knee. “Which one would you like to hear?”

“The one about the long haired lady.” Sophia snuggled against his chest as he began.

“There once was a beautiful woman with hair the color of spun gold that reached well past her waist and a singing voice that rivaled the angels.”

He caught one of Sophia’s curls in his hand and twilled it with his fingers. “A selfish man who could not see her worth sold her to an equally villainous man who locked her away. Only she was far too smart for the unscrupulous men. One day she found a way to escape, hiding herself away in a stranger’s coach.”

Sophia rubbed her fingers back and forth across his collarbone, a small sigh drifting from her lips.

“The woman had found her way into a duke’s carriage, though she did not know it at the time. When he discovered her he could not help but offer his assistance.”

Aaron trailed off as someone entered the room, delicate footfalls giving them away.

“Together the duke and the fair haired woman stopped the villains, saving each other and earning their happily ever after.” Emma finished the story coming to stand beside the chair, her hand resting

on his shoulder.

Sophia glanced up, understanding dawning in her gaze. "Mama, you are the woman in the story."

Aaron chuckled, "Indeed she is."

"I knew it." Sophia grinned, climbing from his lap. She moved to the floor and started playing with her doll.

Aaron stood, coming up behind Emma and wrapping his arms around her waist. He spread his fingers across her swollen belly where his twins grew. Evidence of the love they shared. His heart warmed as it always did when his wife came near.

He bent his head close to her ear, inhaling her lavender scent. "Have I told you I love you today?"

She craned her neck to gaze at him. "At least a half dozen times, and yet I never tire of hearing it."

He smiled the rakish grin he knew she adored. "Then I shall endeavor to say it a dozen more before the day fades away. And every day here after." Emma turned in his arms to rest her hand on his cheek and stare into the depths of his eyes. "As will I."

Excerpt: Enchanted by the Earl

Explore the rest of the series! Turn the page for an excerpt from book one in Amanda Mariel's bestselling Fabled Love series:

Enchanted by the Earl

****The Fabled Love series is designed so that the books can be read in any order****

Chapter 1

L*ondon 1813*

The creak of carriage wheels pulled Rose's attention away from the garden, where, kneeling in the beds, she inspected the bright blooms she had tended all spring. Lady Julia Thorne's elegant barouche pulled to a stop outside the cottage Rose shared with her elderly grandmother. Heartbeat accelerating, Rose stood and dusted her hands on her apron, leaving streaks of dirt behind.

A tall gentleman with raven hair and eyes the shade of the mid-summer sky stood near the open carriage door. Rose caught herself staring at the strong lines of his jaw as he handed her client, Lady Julia, down from the carriage.

Her pulse quickened as her visitors drew nearer. She kept her gaze on the gentleman--he was the handsomest she had ever beheld. When he looked her way, Rose's cheeks burned at being caught ogling him so unabashedly. Lady Julia smiled as Rose approached. "Miss Woodcourt, I've come to select the cloth for my new frocks. Did you manage to get the samples I requested?"

"I called upon the linen-drapers on Cheapside yesterday," Rose returned cheerfully. She was always glad to see Lady Julia, who had become much more to her than a client. "Please come in." Walking up the front walk to her home, she pulled open the weathered door.

Lady Julia moved past her in a swish of green organdy. Her companion stopped on the old plank-board porch. "I'll wait here if it is all the same to you, miss." His breathtaking grin revealed straight white teeth.

Rose stared, awestruck by his good looks. The door handle slid from her palm, causing the door to slam. She jumped at the noise, her nerve endings crackling.

He pulled the wooden panel back open, blue eyes twinkling.

“Allow me, miss.”

Warmth flooded Rose’s cheeks as she took a step toward the opening. A flush spread to her neck. Taking a breath she inhaled his heady aroma of clover and sage.

“What is your name, miss?”

“Rose Woodcourt.” She glanced at his hand and noticed a signet ring glinting upon his finger. She quickly added, “my lord.”

Of course he was a lord and she a bird-witted fool for reacting so strongly to him. It would best serve her to remember her place in society. Lords did not go about courting common misses. They dallied with them until they grew bored, tossing them aside when the affair no longer held their interest. Rose’s indignation stirred at memories of poor Annie. A rakish earl cast her old friend away after he had gotten her with child. Abandoned and afraid, Annie came to Rose for help. But alas, there was nothing to be done. Annie died bringing forth that odious man’s son.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Woodcourt.” He offered a smile. “I am Hunter Thorne, Earl of Aubry.”

Rose dropped into a low curtsy, holding his gaze. Try as she might, she could not stop looking at him.

A ball of nerves unfurled in her stomach as she accepted his offered hand. A moment later, she pulled her hand free. “Excuse me, Lord Aubry, but Lady Julia is waiting.”

Upon entering her workroom, she found Lady Julia perched on a faded high-back chair. The sweet aroma of fresh bread wafting through the cottage, coupled with the teacup in Lady Julia’s hand, told Rose her grandmother had seen to Lady Julia’s comfort before returning to the kitchen. “Please forgive my disheveled state. I am afraid I lost track of time.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. Shall we?” Lady Julia smiled.

Rose hurried to her shelves and scooped up several bundles of cloth. “Yes, of course. Here are samples for your consideration.” She placed the pile on her sewing table. “The linen-draper assures me these are the newest available. Some came directly from the Orient.”

Rose watched Lady Julia lift a swatch of blue organdy. *The very shade of Lord Aubry’s eyes.* The pair shared the same eye color and shade of hair, the same smile. Were they related? As hope set its hooks in Rose’s heart, she cast away her fancies. She should banish him from her mind lest she wind up like poor Annie. “What a lovely shade, my lady.”

Gran’s voice rang out from the entryway. “I said you shan’t disturb Rose. Mr. Wolfe, you mustn’t go in there.”

Good heavens! That reprobate, Dewitt Wolfe, had darkened her stoop again. Would he never leave her in peace?

“Please excuse me for a moment, Lady Julia.” With her heart thumping, Rose moved to the door. Why wouldn’t he leave her alone? She had broken their betrothal and made her position clear. Yet he refused to accept her decision.

Mr. Wolfe stopped mid-step. Gran came just short of colliding into his backside. “Ah, there you are, my dear.” His mouth twisted into a grin. “I have come to--”

Frustrated beyond reason, Rose forgot she had company. She cut him short, speaking sharper than she intended. “I know why you have come. You need not go on. I have given you my answer.” As she stared into his beady brown eyes, her stomach roiled. “I will not marry you, Mr. Wolfe.”

Flashing a tight smile, Wolfe marched toward her, his dull brown hair disheveled and sticking out from under his tall beaver hat. “You will marry me.” He reached into his pocket and whipped out a folded document. “I had hoped you would not force my hand thusly.” He held the folded parchment out to her, his darkened gaze bored into hers. “The unpaid mortgage to this humble dwelling, my dear. Should you refuse to wed me, I will sell your home out from under you.”

Rose grabbed the document, peeled it open, and scanned the print. Her stomach rolled over, and a knot formed in her throat. She crumpled the parchment in her fist before glaring at him. “You cannot. This is nothing but a trick. Papa paid off the mortgage years ago.”

“I can and I shall.”

Something sinister flickered in his eyes. His stony glare sent a chill through her bloodstream.

“Do not allow this brute to force your hand, Rose,” Gran said, dabbing her eyes. “All will be fine. Even if we lose the cottage, we will find a way.” Gran shook her head, freeing a few strands of graying auburn hair loose from her bun.

Oh, how Rose wished that were so. But the cottage was all she had left of her childhood and her parents, after the carriage accident that claimed their lives. How could Mr. Wolfe gain proof of an unpaid debt that had been settled years ago? She sucked in a breath and squared her shoulders.

“I will prove this is a farce. My answer is still no. I will not marry you. Please leave us in peace.”

When she turned to walk away, he caught her arm, spinning her back to face him.

“The document is legal,” he sneered. “Your dear father never finished paying his debt. I own this cottage due to the breach of this contract.” He stepped closer. “You should be thanking me for saving you from debtors’ prison.”

She jerked her arm free and took a step back from him. Looking up into his cold dark eyes, she mustered all of her courage. "Mr. Wolfe, let me be clear. I will never marry you." Not backing down from his glare, she straightened herself and lifted her chin. "Leave my home at once, Mr. Wolfe." Rose stood her ground and fought her tears. She refused to allow Mr. Wolfe to see how upset he made her.

"I would be happy to do so...as soon as you agree to become my wife."

Lord Aubry stepped up behind him. "I am certain Miss Woodcourt asked you to leave the premises, sir."

His rich voice wrapped around Rose like a warm shawl on an icy night. Her limbs tingled in response, as she swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She could not cry in front of them. She would perish of embarrassment if she did.

Without changing his facial sneer, he bit out his retort. "Who are you to give me orders?" Mr. Wolfe spun to face Lord Aubry. His shoulders slumped as he dropped into a bow. "Forgive me, my lord. I am afraid you came upon a private matter and tempers are high." He straightened before tossing a glance over his shoulder at Rose, his lips pressed into a tight line.

Rose looked at Lord Aubry who stood there with a tight smile, then back at Wolfe. Cold fear trickled through her veins. Wolfe would not take kindly to Lord Aubry's interference.

The earl stepped forward, directly in front of Wolfe, his shoulders squared, his scowl dangerous. "You will show yourself out, this instant."

Rose stared at the men, her cheeks burning. As much as she appreciated his help, she would rather keep her struggles with this unsavory character private.

"Yes, my lord. Right away." Wolfe stepped around Lord Aubry, but not before glowering at her. A moment later the door slammed, shaking the floor beneath Rose's feet. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Thank you, Lord Aubry." She dipped into a deep curtsy. Gratitude filled her, but her stomach also knotted. She knew Mr. Wolfe would not give up easily, and Lord Aubry was not likely to be around the next time she found herself in need of saving.



Rose clutched the proof in her reticule as she marched toward

the constable's office. She had launched a frantic search through Papa's old records last night. Hours were spent sorting through dusty ledgers, until at last she found the slip of parchment she needed. Rose pulled the receipt out and stared at it. Just how Mr. Wolfe managed to forge mortgage papers was beyond her understanding. Well, soon enough, she would prove Mr. Wolfe to be the fraud she knew he was.

A gentleman in a tall hat rushed past as she reached for the office door. A gust of air created by his movement snatched the precious receipt from her hand. The document danced on the breeze, pausing briefly, then bounced across the walkway. Her pulse quickening, Rose hurried after the receipt. As she stooped to grab her proof, another wind gust snatched the parchment from her fingertips, carrying it away. It landed on the edge of a mud puddle in the center of the busy street. Rose's chest tightened with dread. If the receipt were ruined, she would have nothing to disprove Mr. Wolfe's lies.

Scrambling after the small piece of parchment, she made to grab it, but the wind gave it wings *again*. She paid no mind to the people moving all around her as she dodged between them, desperate to reclaim her proof.

The receipt once again, fluttered down, landing in the very puddle from which Rose had just attempted to save it. Her heart sank. She reached out, fingers brushing the receipt, but pulled back when a carriage rattled by. *No, no, no. This cannot be happening.* If she lost her proof, Rose knew she would also lose the cottage. She edged closer to the curb. As she did, a horse approached with a quick gate. Rose jumped back and watched, as its hooves trampled her hope into the muddy pool.

Dropping to her knees, she reached for the soiled receipt, heedless of her gown. *Please let the writing still be legible.* She leaned over as far as she could, and fished the parchment out of the muddied water. Her heart tumbled to her toes. The ink was smeared beyond recognition. Nothing more than black streaks remained. What was she to do now?

"Miss Woodcourt?" A deep baritone voice invaded her thoughts.

She turned her head, her gaze colliding with Lord Aubry's.

Rose took the hand he offered, allowing him to pull her up. She glanced down at the sopping parchment. "Gone, it is all gone." Her voice shook as she met his questioning gaze.

"What is gone?"

"This! My proof." Frustrated, she dangled the wet, smeared receipt in front of him. Her white gloves were stained with muddy street

water from fishing the receipt out of the gutter. Rose struggled to maintain her composure.

"I am afraid I do not follow, Miss Woodcourt." Concern flashed in his blue eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, determined to stay calm. "It was the receipt proving Papa had indeed paid off the mortgage he owed Mr. Wolfe's father. I intended to take the proof to the constable. Now I have nothing." Rose fought rising panic, her free hand fisting her skirt.

"You might still hire the Bow Street Runners to investigate." He studied her, his gaze softened.

Something in the way he searched her face warmed her deep inside. "That is not an option. I must go, my lord." She dipped into a curtsy.

He caught her elbow and pulled her to her feet. "Pray tell, why is hiring a Bow Street runner not an option?" Rose could not ignore the small butterflies taking flight in her belly at his touch.

She peered up into his sky-blue gaze and nibbled her lip. How could she admit to him that hiring them was beyond her financial reach? Without proof they could not simply right the wrong. Perhaps Wolfe could be arrested. No. She would have to hand over coin, and plenty of it, for an investigation. She had no extra coin. No matter how she tried to think to answer him, she simply couldn't respond. She stood mute, gazing at him.

"Do you intend to ignore me?" Frustration coated Lord Aubry's words. He released his grip on her.

Rose glanced up at him. *Could he help?* She wanted to ask, but made no move to speak.

"If you tell me what the issue is perhaps I may be able to assist you." His eyes were locked on hers. His voice was gentle. An odd sensation unfurled in her midsection.

Rose averted her gaze, not entirely sure she wished to share her struggles with him.

"Very well," he said. "Keep your secrets for now, if you must."

"I cannot afford an investigation at this time, and I do not desire your assistance." Her cheeks flamed at the admission. "I could not possibly impose." Her insides felt so strange. Why did he affect her so?

"There is no imposition. In fact, I insist." Grinning, he extended his arm. His day coat clung to his chest, revealing a muscular physique.

"That is most generous, but I cannot allow it." Rose forced a smile.

Pity flickered in his eyes as he held her gaze.

How mortifying. A flush spread from her chest up her neck. The last thing she wanted was to become his charity case.

"At the least, allow me to take you home," he offered.

She flashed a smile and turned, intending to take her leave. "I can see myself home. Thank you."

Taking her elbow, he turned her to face him. "Nonsense. There is no reason for you to hire a hackney when I have a perfectly good carriage right here." He gestured toward the same impressive coach that had delivered Lady Julia to her door the previous day.

Rose nibbled her lower lip in thought. The pair shared the same surname, but how were they related? Could they be siblings or cousins, perchance? Regardless, Lady Julia was fond of him. Perhaps not all lords were as odious as Annie's earl had been. Surely, she would not come to harm simply by allowing him to drive her home. "Very well." She sighed.

Her thrill of longing went through her when she wrapped her hand under his upper arm. She was certain the reaction had nothing to do with her current predicament. *Stop you ninny, he is a lord. Lords do not court untitled misses.* Mayhap if she told herself that enough she would get him out of her mind.

Lord Aubry waved off his driver. Instead, he opened the door to his coach and pulled down a tiny step for her to use. Holding her firmly, he assisted her up into the black lacquer barouche, his crest emblazoned on the door. Her skirt rustled as she sat down on the overstuffed leather seat. She had never been inside such a fine conveyance.

The lopsided grin he offered set her heart aflutter. She smiled back before averting her gaze. It would not do for him to see how deeply he affected her. Besides, her thinking became muddled while looking at him. She needed to focus on the problem of Mr. Wolfe. There had to be a way to stop him, without sending her to the poorhouse. *There simply had to be.*

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Amanda Mariel dreams of days gone by when life moved at a slower pace. She enjoys taking pen to paper and exploring historical time periods through her imagination and the written word. When she is not writing she can be found reading, crocheting, traveling, practicing her photography skills, or spending time with her family.

Visit www.amandamariel.com for more information on Amanda and her books.

Sign up for Amanda's newsletter while you are at her website to stay up-to-date on all things Amanda Mariel and receive a free eBook!

amanda@amandamariel.com



Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Delighted by the Duke*.

Your opinion matters!

Please take a moment to review this book on your favorite review site
and share your opinion with fellow readers.

USA Today bestselling author



~Heartwarming historical romances that leave you breathless~

Only a Rogue Knows

Rebecca Lovell

Chapter 1

The thick curtains that covered the window in Cordelia Whittemore's bedroom made it almost impossible for any light to get through, and that suited her just fine. She didn't want anyone to see her crying, especially a passing servant. She looked up, clutching her handkerchief, and the image of what she'd just seen came back into her head and started a fresh wave of tears.

She'd trusted him, and he'd gone and done something like this. They'd hardly been married a month and now she had no idea what was she supposed to do with the rest of her life. Cordelia put her face in her hands. It felt as if she'd never stop crying.

"Cordelia!" Her door burst open and Arthur came hurrying through, tucking his neatly pressed white shirt into his pants. "I'm so sorry, my dear, I didn't intend for you to see that." She looked away from him, hiding most of her face in shadow. She didn't want him to see how upset she was, but the tears in her voice couldn't be hidden.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Since long before we were married. I didn't want you to find out this way." Arthur took a step toward her and she stood up and moved further away. "I'm truly sorry." Of this Cordelia had no doubt but she didn't know how to forgive him for infidelity, much less infidelity of this sort.

"I'm sure you are," she said, recovering enough to put a note of ice in her voice. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Don't tell anyone," he said, his voice almost pleading. "Please. It would kill my father."

"You know I could divorce you for this," Cordelia said, turning her back on him. "And the Court would allow it, as would the Church. It's a mortal sin, Arthur."

"I know, and I'm begging you not to. I never wanted to get married in the first place," he said. "Father said that if I didn't marry and give him an heir he would disown me. Once he dies, I'll be Lord Whittemore and we won't have to worry about him. You can divorce me then if you want."

"And if he doesn't die soon? What then?" Cordelia shook her head. "I can't believe you would ask something like this of me."

"I know," Arthur said. "It's not fair to you. There's nothing else for it, though. If you want to ruin me, then by all means petition for a divorce. You're right, no one would deny it to you and if that's what you wish to do I won't deny you." He came around to where she was facing the wall, forcing Cordelia to look at him. She turned her face toward him, her jaw set in a way that she knew her own father would be proud of.

"All right," she said finally. "I'll keep your secret, but at least keep your affairs out of the house. Find somewhere else to do it or I really will tell your father about it."

"Yes, of course. Whatever you want." Arthur leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek and she shrank away from him. She couldn't bring herself to let him kiss her after seeing him with another man. Cheating aside, she'd brought up to believe that it was unnatural and she didn't know how she'd be able to look at him after this. He didn't try to kiss her again and she looked away, unable to believe she was agreeing to this. "Thank you, my darling. You won't regret this. I'll make sure you have everything you could ever desire."

"Mm." Cordelia kept her face turned away from his and he finally stepped away from her.

"Well, I suppose I should go visit my father. He'll be expecting me later but there's nothing wrong with showing up earlier." *Of course not*, thought Cordelia. *Unless you come home early and find your husband with another man.*

"Be careful," Cordelia said, trying not to sound irritable. Arthur paused for a moment, then walked out of the room quickly, as if he was running away from her.

Once he was gone and the door was closed, Cordelia went behind him and locked it. Then she went back to her place by the window where there was a handsome wooden rocker. She sat down and began to rock back and forth slowly. Her anger was dissipating, being replaced by a deep sadness.

She'd brought the chair with her at her mother's urging, and had been dreaming since she was a girl of sitting in the rocker and rocking her baby to sleep. Now that dream looked to have been shattered. If he wasn't interested in her, then she didn't know how they were going to have a baby. The only time they'd come close to making love was on their wedding night and it had taken quite a lot of effort. She'd attributed it to his being nervous and having had a lot to drink but now she knew better.

Cordelia started to rock faster, focusing on the sliver of light that was coming through the crack in the curtains and not the image of her

husband with another man on his knees in front of him. She didn't know if she'd ever be able to get it out of her head. More tears threatened to fall and she tried to will them away. She'd have to deal with the staff before too long and she didn't want it to look like she'd been crying. They were all so kind, they'd want to know what was going on and she didn't want to have to lie to them.

It suddenly occurred to her that they may have known about this all along. Feeling betrayed by both her staff and her husband, Cordelia sighed heavily and leaned her head back against the chair. She was really stuck now. The longer she stayed in her marriage, the less likely it would be for her to be able to get a divorce. All she could do was hope for her father-in-law to die soon so she could get out of her marriage, and that made her feel even worse.

I'm well and truly trapped now, she thought. I wish Father had never made this arrangement.

Chapter 2

“D^{elia!}” With her customary grin, Cordelia’s younger sister

came rushing through the door past the butler, her auburn hair threatening to spill out from beneath the wide-brimmed lavender hat she wore. Bridget Ellison, better known as Birdie to her family, had always been the more exuberant of the two and being the baby of the family their parents had been a bit more lenient with her. As a result, no one could stop Birdie once she was in full swing. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“You just saw me last week,” Cordelia said, hugging her sister tightly. Birdie had always looked like a smaller version of her and when they were younger they’d had plenty of people ask if they were twins. Now that they were older there were slight differences in their height and face, but their brown eyes and auburn hair still drew the comparison. “It’s good to see you again, though. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Do I need an excuse to see my sister?” Birdie shook her head. “I just felt like getting away from the mansion for a little while. You hardly ever go out so I thought I’d come see you.” She linked her arm through her sister’s and Cordelia couldn’t help smiling. Birdie’s enthusiasm was contagious and she knew the house so she practically dragged her sister to the sitting room.

“How is your husband?” Breaking with tradition, Birdie had gotten married before Cordelia and was much happier. General Richard Ellison was almost twenty five years older than her but it was obvious to anyone who saw them together that he loved her dearly. Birdie had always fallen in love easily and this was no different. Cordelia couldn’t help but be a little jealous of her because of it.

“Richard’s fine,” she said cheerfully. “He’s so busy these days but he told me last night that he’s considering retiring from the navy so we can spend more time together. I told him not to be silly, I’ve got plenty to occupy me taking care of Walter and my big sister. Besides, we’re going to start trying for a baby of our own soon.”

“You are?” Cordelia tried not to sound dejected by this news. If her

little sister had a baby before her, she wasn't sure if she'd be able to be as happy for her as she wanted. "What does Walter think about this?"

"We don't discuss what goes on in our bedroom with our son," Birdie laughed. Cordelia felt another stab of jealousy. Walter was Richard's son from his previous marriage, and Birdie had naturally taken him under her wing immediately. His mother had passed away some ten years earlier when he was a toddler and he couldn't quite bring himself to call her Mother yet but if she knew her sister, she would talk him into it sooner or later. Everyone loved Birdie. "And *speaking* of what goes on in the bedroom," Birdie said, looking around to see if any of the servants were listening, "I have heard some very interesting gossip about your husband."

"Have you?" Alarm bells were going off in Cordelia's head. When she'd told Arthur to keep it out of the house, she hadn't considered that he'd just go down to the town to pursue his affairs. They lived out in the country, well away from Greenley, but she would have at least hoped he would go another town or so over to keep up appearances. "I'm sure it's all nonsense."

"I should hope so." Birdie dragged her into the sitting room and closed the doors behind her. She made as if she was going to lock them and Cordelia sighed.

"Don't do that, you're acting like we're telling family secrets in here."

"We very well could be," Birdie fired back. She went to one of the wing-backed chairs and plopped down in it, looking very much like the little girl she had been ten years earlier. They'd long since faded with age and better care, but Cordelia almost felt like she could even see the ghost of her freckles. Cordelia sat down in the chair beside her.

"All right, what's this gossip you're on about?"

"Well," Birdie said, leaning in conspiratorially, "I heard down at the notions shop that there are rumors that Arthur has been seen in the company of men." She raised an eyebrow at her sister, who cursed her husband again for being so indiscreet. "And not only that, but they also said that most of them were lower class. Have you heard any of that?"

"Of course not," Cordelia said, hoping she sounded properly indignant. "That's all a bunch of nonsense and you know it. In fact, you should be ashamed of yourself for repeating it. Arthur and I are very much in love and there's no way he would be associating with those sorts of people." She folded her arms over her chest. "Ridiculous."

"Maybe it is," Birdie said with a shrug. "The dressmaker seemed quite sure she'd seen him, though. He is rather well-known

in the town.”

“All the more reason this is ridiculous. Even if he were going to have an affair he would hardly do it where everyone knows him.” She shook her head. “Did you come all the way out here just to spread silly gossip like this?”

“Of course not,” Birdie said. “I was coming out here anyway and thought I’d stop into the notions shop to get some supplies for my lacemaking, and that’s where I overheard the dressmaker talking to Mrs. Beewich.” She opened the bag that Cordelia hadn’t even noticed was over her arm and started taking out a large quantity of thread and a needle.

“You really should let your staff get those things for you,” Cordelia said, realizing just how much she sounded like her mother. Birdie looked at her and grinned.

“Oh, should I? I think this is far more fun. Otherwise I wouldn’t hear the good gossip. Apart from what I heard about Arthur, which you have assured me is nonsense, I also heard that Emmeline Warwick is pregnant with twins. Can you imagine? Two babies at one time! I don’t even know how you’d do that. I mean, I suppose women do have two breasts---“

“Bridget Ann Payne!”

“It’s not Payne anymore,” Bridget said, sticking her tongue out at her sister. She’d been prone to fits of being inappropriate since they were children but sometimes Cordelia couldn’t believe the things that came out of her mouth. She wondered what General Ellison had to say about it. “Anyhow, you never come to see me so the only time I get to see you is if I come out here.”

“Excuse me, my ladies,” a quiet voice said at the same time a light knock came on the door to the sitting room. Cordelia gave her sister a look that clearly said she needed to behave, then turned to the door.

“Come in, Patricia.” The door opened and a young woman in a maid’s uniform came in. She was new to the staff and very pretty, and Cordelia couldn’t help thinking a little bitterly that at least she’d never have to worry about Arthur sleeping with her. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter, Lady Whittemore. I was coming to ask if you and your sister would like tea.”

“Oh, yes, please,” Birdie said with a smile.

“Thank you Patricia, that would be lovely.” The maid bowed her head, then went back out of the room. She closed the door behind her and Cordelia turned back to her sister. “She’s been quite a quick learner. You only need to ask her to do something once and she remembers it for later. I wish all our staff were as good.”

“Me too,” Birdie said. “I swear our maid is so old that she forgets her own name sometimes.” Birdie picked up the needle and thread

and started making a series of complicated knots. Cordelia admired her sister's ability to work with her hands so deftly when she was hardly paying attention to what she was doing and if she hadn't been watching her make lace since they were teenagers she could have been distracted staring at her. "So what do you do all the time out here by yourself?"

"I read, mainly," Cordelia said. "There's a nice bookseller in town and I send the staff to get me a selection every now and again."

"You should take up a hobby," Birdie said. "Like lacemaking or something like it. You could learn to quilt." As if to make her point, she made another knot with a flourish. "I can't wait until I have a daughter so I can teach her how to do this."

"I don't have any talents," Cordelia said. "Not like you. You know I've always been clumsy with my hands. Mother was so disappointed in me."

"That's not true," Birdie said. "You used to play the piano, remember? Mother always commented to her friends on how quickly you picked it up. Whyever didn't you continue with it?"

"I honestly don't remember," Cordelia said. "Something to do with the teacher, maybe?" She frowned slightly. Something had caused her to stop playing but she couldn't remember what it was. "I do remember having fun with it, though."

"So take it up again," Birdie said. "I'm sure Arthur would be more than happy to buy you a piano. It would give you something to do and I'm sure you'd be able to pick up where you left off." She grinned. "With all the free time you have around here you might even be able to learn how to write your own songs. That would be fun."

"I'd need a teacher for that," Cordelia said. "I may be able to figure out the basics by myself but I'd have to have someone show me how to do anything complicated. You're right, though, I'd only have to ask Arthur nicely and I'd have a piano in here the next day."

"See? It's perfect. Have him bring you in a piano and start playing again. Maybe you'll get so good again that you'll be able to teach your children how to play. Maybe one of them could become a composer or famous musician!"

"That would be nice," Cordelia said with a smile. "I do love music."

"Then it's settled," Birdie said, setting down her lace and reaching over to pick up her sister's hands. "My sister, the musician."

"Don't be silly, Birdie. I'm hardly a musician yet." Still, she couldn't stop thinking about how much she had enjoyed the piano as a child. Something like that would definitely take her mind off things. Arthur's affairs, which he seemed to be having all over the place with no thought to propriety, their inability to even attempt to have

children, and her own loneliness out in the country with no one to talk to but the staff. "I'll ask Arthur straightaway when he comes home."

"Good. Speaking of children," Birdie said, squeezing her sister's hands and then letting go of them to work on her lace, "when are you and Arthur going to start trying for them?"

"I thought you wanted me to become a great pianist."

"Of course I do. There's no law saying you can't do both, is there? You can play the piano all you like while you're pregnant, and there's staff to help with the baby after it's born. You wouldn't be able to go play anywhere for quite some time but you'd still be able to play here at the manor." Birdie was almost as excited about the idea as her sister and Cordelia smiled.

"We shall see what happens," she said. "I wonder if Mother has any of my old piano books."

"You should get new ones," Birdie said. "She's probably got them hidden somewhere. Not to mention you wore them out back then. Don't you remember? The pages were all bent down and ratty."

"Bent down!" Cordelia was scandalized. She couldn't imagine ever being so careless with her things. She was so careful with the pages of her books now that it was unthinkable. Birdie laughed and shook her head.

"You're the one who's silly, Delia." The maid knocked again on the door, then came in with a tray with a teapot and some small cakes. Birdie carefully folded her lace in on itself and set it aside as Patricia put the tray on the table between the ladies, then poured each of them a cup of tea. "That looks wonderful."

"Thank you, Patricia." Cordelia smiled at the maid, who nodded her head and bowed back out of the room. "She's such a good addition to the household," she said, adding a bit of milk before picking up her cup of tea. "My lady's maid is considering leaving us soon to take care of her mother. I wonder if Patricia would be interested in learning how to do for me instead of serving."

"Would that be proper?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. She's new to serving but as I said, she's a quick learner. She's only seventeen, they learn faster at that age. She's also clean, and very well-mannered. She's only become a serving maid because her mother was one." Cordelia sipped her tea. "I can ask Mrs. Richmond about it, she'll know for certain."

"Yes, definitely." Birdie picked up the plate with the cake on it. "Although she'll probably tell you it's improper and that you should hire someone older."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Mrs. Richmond had come with Cordelia from her parents' house, and both girls remembered her from their

childhood. Even then she'd had iron-grey hair and walked as if she had a rod in her back. Anything and everything was improper to her, and it had been funny when they were children, terrifying when they were teenagers, and now that they were adults it was back to being amusing. Birdie hadn't been sorry to see her go with Cordelia, who supposed it was better for her to deal with the old woman. If she'd had to live with Birdie and her free-spirited ways, it would likely send her to an early grave. The doors to the sitting room swung open again, this time without warning, and Cordelia looked over to see Arthur coming through with his arms open.

"Good afternoon, ladies!" He went first to Cordelia and kissed her on the cheek, which she allowed with a smile, then did the same to Birdie. "It's good to see you, Mrs. Ellison."

"Oh please, Arthur," Birdie laughed. "You do know how to make me smile."

"That's good," he said, sitting on the couch that faced the wing-backed chairs. "It's such a nice smile, we should see it all the time. So what are you ladies talking about?"

"We were talking about a hobby for me," Cordelia said, adding a little more milk to her tea. It was stronger than usual but she didn't want to complain. "I was thinking that perhaps I should get a piano. I used to play as a child and I think I'd like to take it up again."

"That's a splendid idea," Arthur said, crossing a leg over his knee. "I should love to hear you play sometime. We can have one in here in just a few days, I'm sure. You just make a list of what you want to go with it and find a place for it and we'll get you set up."

"Wonderful. Thank you, dear." Mindful that Birdie was watching her, she leaned across the table and kissed Arthur on the cheek. He offered it to her showily and out of the corner of her eye Cordelia could see Birdie watching them approvingly. Perhaps playing the piano again really would take her mind off the fact that she would be doing this for years to come. She struggled not to sigh as she sat back and took another sip of her tea.

The thought did not fill her with hope.

Chapter 3

A little over a month later, Cordelia regretted ever thinking that playing the piano wouldn't help her forget her problems. True to his word, Arthur had a piano delivered the very next day and the workmen had installed it in a large, well-lit room that had served as a neglected library for a time. The grand piano looked perfectly at home and when she went into the room that Arthur had started calling the Conservatory, she felt at home too. It made her happy for a change, something that had become harder as of late.

Surprising both of them, Arthur's father developed pneumonia after a week of rain and passed away before the doctors were able to do so much as begin to treat him. Cordelia had felt a flicker of hope when it happened, hoping that she would be allowed to divorce Arthur and move on with her life. Unfortunately, her hopes had been dashed as soon as she'd allowed them to rise when Arthur had told her that they'd have to remain married for a little longer to keep up appearances.

Cordelia had spent most of her time playing the piano and, much to her surprise, the ability that her sister remembered so well had come back to her. The beginner's music books she had sent over were opened, flown through, and mastered in a matter of days and she had put in an order for some more difficult ones in the hopes she would be able to work through them a little more slowly.

She was in the Conservatory playing a simple canon when a knock on the door made her look up. Mrs. Richmond came in, looking severe as usual, with a package in her hands.

"This just arrived for you," she said, holding out the package. "From a music store in London. I suppose Lord Whittemore paid for it to come all this way."

"Thank you, Mrs. Richmond." Cordelia took the package from her and turned it over in her hands. It was thin but she could tell it was music books. The thought made her smile and the older of the two women gave her a tight smile of her own.

"He must really love you," Mrs. Richmond said. "You and Bridget

are very lucky to have been married to two such loving husbands.” She sniffed. “Many women don’t get the luxury of husbands who do. It’s as if you two were touched by God.”

“Yes,” Cordelia said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “We’re both very lucky indeed.” She must have succeeded in keeping her tone even, because Mrs. Richmond gave her a neat nod and turned to go.

Once she was gone, Cordelia sat down at the piano again and opened the package. She tried to force herself to stay calm but she hadn’t been this excited in days. Being nearly alone in a massive estate with no one to talk to, even with her now-beloved piano, had started taking its toll on her. The books that appeared when she set aside the plain brown wrapper breathed life into her and she smiled far more broadly than she had at Mrs. Richmond.

The top book was far too advanced for her, she could tell that just by thumbing through it, but she also knew that if she worked at it she would be able to play it in time. Part of her felt a surge of affection for Arthur in spite of everything. That he would think her capable of something so advanced was flattering. She wished he did love her. She wanted more than anything for him to love her but she knew that was impossible, just like the melodies in the book.

The second one was more on her level, and she set the others aside and put it on the stand. The notes were a little more difficult than what she was used to and she played through the first sonata slowly, pensively, getting a feel for them as she did. Her mind worked as her fingers moved as if on their own, reading ahead and hoping that her muscles would know what to do.

Somewhere else in the house, Cordelia could hear someone knocking on the door. Thinking that she had staff to deal with that sort of thing, she tried to put it out of her mind while she played on. The notes came more naturally to her and she finished the song, then smiled broadly at the music. It was perfect. She hoped she would be able to play it at the correct speed soon. It would be even better then.

“Cordelia, if I could interrupt a moment?” Arthur’s voice to her left made her open her eyes and when she did her heart stopped. There was another man with him, a very handsome man. She could hardly blame Arthur for having an affair with this man, not even a little. Why he would introduce him to her was beyond Cordelia’s knowledge but if this was his new game she supposed they would play it for the time being.

“Of course,” Cordelia said, standing up from her seat to join them at the door. The closer she got to the men, the more handsome the man got. He had jet black hair that was slightly longer than her husband’s and quite a bit messier. He looked as if he’d just gotten off a

horse and hadn't bothered to tidy himself up. It was his eyes, though, that were really striking. They were a shade of blue Cordelia had never encountered before, with a hint of green that rendered them almost turquoise. Yes, she could definitely see the attraction. "Good afternoon," she said, nodding her head at him.

"Victor, this is my wife," Arthur said, motioning to Cordelia with a smile. "Cordelia darling, this is Victor Pembroke, my attorney."

"Oh," Cordelia said, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Pembroke." She offered her hand to him and he raised it to his lips, brushing them against the back of her hand lightly. Instantly, Cordelia's cheeks were on fire and she fought to control herself.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted you," Victor said, releasing her hand but not her gaze. "We should leave you to your playing, milady."

"That's quite all right," Cordelia said, a bit too quickly. Even if he did prefer the company of men, she wouldn't have minded having him stay a little longer.

"We have business to conduct anyhow," Arthur said. "With Father's passing, I took the liberty of employing a new attorney." He motioned to the door. "Come, Victor, let me show you to the study and we can get started."

"Of course." With a slight inclination of his head in Cordelia's direction, Victor followed Arthur out of the conservatory and left Cordelia looking after them longingly. She wondered if all the men he was interested in looked like that.

With a sigh, she sat back down at the piano and found to her surprise that the pages of the music book she had set on the stand were open to a different song than the one she'd started. She turned the pages back, unable to believe she'd really played through the entire thing already. *I suppose I should try playing it at full speed now*, she thought. *Perhaps that other book isn't so far out of my reach after all. Mother would be so proud.*

She flipped through the pages, humming the notes as she came across them, then put her fingers on the keys. She smiled pleasantly and began to play the same song she had before, but a little faster. It was an upbeat piece and it lifted her spirits as the others had, and before she realized it she was playing even faster. Cordelia decided to see what she could really do, so she flipped to a random page and started to play.

Cordelia was so lost in her own world that she almost didn't hear the clapping coming from the doorway. She turned quickly, pressing a hand to her chest, and was surprised to feel her heart racing beneath it.

"Very nice, very nice," Victor said, still clapping. "You play quite

beautifully, Lady Whittemore.”

“Thank you,” Cordelia said, surprised to find she was blushing again. There was no way her husband could have conducted his sort of ‘business’ with the lawyer so quickly, leading her to believe that he really was just there to deal with the estate. “I’ve just started learning again.”

“You can’t be serious,” Victor said, pushing himself off the doorframe and walking toward her. “That’s the sort of music I’d expect to hear from a woman who had been playing for five or ten years. Are you sure you hadn’t started sooner?”

“I played when I was a child,” Cordelia said, standing up. “My sister reminded me of it and I started playing again a month or so ago. It all just seemed to come back at once, I suppose.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Victor said. “I’m a great lover of the arts. Music is one of my favorite things.”

“Do you play too?” Cordelia smiled, excited to have something in common with this handsome man who may not have been interested in her husband after all.

“Oh, not me,” he said, holding up his hands and shaking his head. “I’m more of a listener, not a performer. And I would love to listen to more of your music. If you’re willing to play for me, that is.” Now Cordelia was really blushing, and she shook her head.

“I’m nowhere near good enough for a recital just yet,” she said. “Perhaps you should come back in a few weeks. I’ll be happy to play something for you then.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Victor said, arching his eyebrow at her. The same rakish smile he’d given her earlier tugged at his lips and she felt the blush creeping down her neck as well. She was glad she wasn’t wearing anything with a neckline, otherwise she would have been pink down her breasts as well. Cursing herself for blushing so easily, she managed a coquettish smile.

“I shall have to work extra hard to get up to snuff.”

“There you are, sir,” Mrs. Richmond said, coming through the Conservatory’s doors. “Lord Whittemore wanted me to catch you before you rode off. I believe he had one more question for you.” She turned her piercing eyes on Cordelia, scanned her, then turned her attention to Victor. “I didn’t expect to find you in here with the Lady.”

“Just admiring her musical talent,” Victor said, bowing slightly to Cordelia as he turned to go. “Good afternoon, Lady Whittemore.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pembroke.” She watched him go, fully aware of the withering look Mrs. Richmond was giving her and already preparing for the lecture on propriety she was about to get once he was gone. Cordelia wasn’t looking forward to it, but it wouldn’t be the first one she’d heard. Of course, Birdie was usually the one on the

receiving end but she'd listened to them all the same.

She sat back down and started playing again, thinking about what Victor had said. As much as he'd supported her by buying her the piano and music books, Arthur had never said much about her playing itself. Patricia had told her once when she brought her tea that she enjoyed hearing her play but no one else had so much as mentioned it. Cordelia wondered if anyone else would like her playing.

The idea hadn't left her head by the time she went to dinner, and when she sat at the opposite end of the table from Arthur it had taken on a life of its own. While the serving staff brought around the food and wine, she tried to work up the nerve to ask her husband for another favor. She knew she had every right to ask it and more, but she hadn't been brought up to ask for too much. Birdie had always been the one who said exactly what she wanted.

"Arthur," she said, surprising herself when she heard the words spoken aloud, "I was thinking about having a party."

"A party? So soon after Father's death?" He looked just as surprised as she felt and she nodded. "What brought this on?"

"I was playing from the books you had sent for me from London and Mr. Pembroke commented that my playing sounded quite a bit more polished than I thought it would be at this point, and I remembered playing for my parents' friends when I was a girl." She cut into her roast and took a bite, watching Arthur's face as he did the same.

"That would probably be quite nice," Arthur said thoughtfully. "Though we wouldn't be able to have it for another week or two at least. It would be best for us to wait a bit longer than a month after Father's passing, but if it's a few days give or take no one should bat an eye."

Apart from Mrs. Richmond, Cordelia thought, taking a sip of her wine. She hadn't yet received her scolding for talking to Victor alone but she was sure it was coming. Perhaps not as pointedly as it had when she was a girl, but it was coming all the same.

"What would you say to Saturday the seventeenth? We can have your sister and her husband, and some of my friends and associates, and you could favor us with a song or two." Arthur speared a potato on the same fork as a carrot and smiled. "Is there anyone you should like to invite?"

"How about Mr. Pembroke? As it was his comment that inspired me to perform in the first place." She hoped she sounded casual, as if she'd only just thought of it, and kept a careful eye on Arthur to see how he responded.

"That sounds like a splendid idea, darling. This house is so big, we should make it a party that's befitting of the place. I'm sure Father

would approve.” His smile was wide enough that she couldn’t see any suspicion in it and Cordelia smiled brightly.

“Thank you, Arthur, I’m getting excited already.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing you play,” he said, taking a drink of his own wine. “You keep practicing as much as you do and I’m sure you’ll put Mozart himself to shame.”

“I’m not sure I’m as good as all that,” Cordelia said almost absently, her mind already on Victor again. She couldn’t stop herself from grinning like a schoolgirl, so she picked up her wine glass and put it to her lips in the hopes of hiding it. The next two weeks were simply going to drag by.

Chapter 4

Now that she'd seen what the house was like when it was full of

people, Cordelia couldn't help thinking that this was the way it was meant to be. She stood at the door with Arthur in the beginning, greeting each guest as they walked through with a smile and thanking them for coming. Each face she saw took away a sliver of her hope, though, because she hadn't seen Victor yet.

She hadn't been able to ask Arthur if he'd gotten an RSVP from Victor, and she hadn't seen his name on the confirmed guest list so she had no idea if he was actually coming or not. The thought that he would say he wanted to hear more of her playing then not come to the party was more than a little disheartening, but she tried her best to act like it wasn't bothering her.

"Delia, this is wonderful," Birdie said, hurrying over to see her sister as she stood by the window in the conservatory. It overlooked the courtyard so she could see who was coming and going, and there was still enough light out to see anyone who might be coming up the front path. She tore her gaze away from the window and turned to her younger sister with a smile. "The house is just beautiful. Wherever did you find all these flowers?"

"I don't know, to be honest," Cordelia said, looking around. There were indeed flowers on just about every surface in the house, but the conservatory was the most spectacular-looking place in the Whittemore estate. "I told Mrs. Richmond what I wanted and she put in an order with a florist in town. They can find just about anything at this time of year, I suppose." She glanced out the window again and Birdie looked out curiously.

"What's outside?"

"Oh, nothing," Cordelia said hurriedly, stepping away from the window. "I was just seeing if anyone else was coming. I wanted to make sure everyone was here before I started playing."

"The soul of a true performer," Birdie teased. "You were just this way when we were girls too. Always so excited when you got ready to play."

“Good evening, ladies,” said a white-haired man who had followed Birdie across the room. Cordelia had seen General Ellison several times since he and Birdie were married and he was quite handsome for an older man. His hair was neatly trimmed, as was his mustache, and he gave the appearance of someone you didn’t want to get on the bad side of. Every time she’d spoken to him, however, he had been quite pleasant and jovial. “Good evening, Lady Whittemore.”

“Oh good heavens,” Cordelia said with a laugh. “You’re my brother-in-law, General. You can feel free to call me by my first name, I’d think.”

“Only if you agree to stop calling me General,” he said, tipping her a wink. He put a hand on Birdie’s waist and she smiled up at him as if he was her entire world, making Cordelia’s heart twist with envy. “Birdie, my dear, would you accompany me to the sitting room for a moment? There’s someone I wish for you to meet.”

“All right,” she said with a quick look at her sister. “I’ll be back in a moment. Don’t start playing without me!”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She watched Birdie and Richard walk away together, her arm linked through his, and she sighed to herself. He really did care for her, and it made her more than a little jealous to hear him call her by the name Cordelia had come up with when they were children. She supposed it was all part of being married.

“Are you about ready to start playing?” Arthur came up behind Cordelia and put a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to look at him. He was just as handsome as Richard, possibly even more so with his dark blonde hair and blue eyes, but the difference between them was deeper than just their hair colors.

“Not quite. My sister went to meet someone on the General’s behalf and made me promise I wouldn’t start without her.”

“Of course we can’t start without darling Bridget,” Arthur said with a laugh. “She’s the one we have to thank for you rediscovering your talent like this.” He leaned forward and gave his wife a peck on the cheek. Conscious that people were watching, Cordelia smiled as if it were the joy of her life. “Would you like a glass of champagne while you wait?”

“That would be lovely,” Cordelia said. “Thank you.”

“I’ll bring it to you myself,” Arthur said. He went to the door of the conservatory with the intention of going to get a glass of champagne, only to stop suddenly and say hello to someone just outside the door. Cordelia was only mildly curious as to who it was until Arthur turned back and pointed to her. She wondered what on earth he was doing until a man came through the door that stopped her heart mid-beat.

“Good evening, Lady Whittemore,” Victor said as he crossed the room to see her. “I hope you’re well this evening.” He took her hand

and kissed the back of it again, the same way he had when they had last met. It must have looked strange to a roomful of people but Cordelia was so happy to have his lips on her skin, even for a moment, that she could have cared less.

"Very well, sir," she said. *Now that you're here, anyhow.* "And yourself?"

"Much better now that I've seen your face," he said, grinning at her. His eyes caught hers and held them as he let go of her hand. "I hope you'll forgive my lateness. There was an urgent matter to attend to at the office and I've come straight over."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Cordelia said, shaking her head. "Everyone's been coming and going as they please, it's all very informal."

"Informal or not, this is quite the party. Please tell me I haven't missed your piano playing."

"Oh no," she said with a smile. "I haven't even begun." Before she knew what she was saying, she blurted out the words. "I was actually waiting for you to get here before I did."

"Were you now?" Victor's eyebrow went up. "And to what do I owe such an honor?"

"You were the one who suggested I should perform. And I've been practicing a few pieces that were quite a bit more difficult than the one you heard me play." She hoped he understood the implication that she had been practicing them for him, and the way he smiled at her gave her the impression that he did. "I hope you'll enjoy them."

"I've been looking forward to it since the last time we met." His eyes moved over her slowly, as if he was drinking her in, and he smiled. "You look absolutely gorgeous tonight, I might add."

"Thank you," Cordelia managed. The way he said it made her blush harder than she had in years. "I would have liked to have a new dress made but I was so wrapped up in my music that it slipped away from me."

"This one looks lovely on you," he said. "Blue is really your color."

"Th-thank you," Cordelia stammered. She hadn't had so many compliments in one evening since her wedding day, and the fact that they were coming from Victor made them even better. He seemed to either not know or not care that what he was saying was probably indiscreet but Cordelia didn't care. She wanted him to go on forever. Unfortunately, it was at that moment that she saw Birdie and Richard come back through the Conservatory's door and she motioned to them. "Well now that you're here and my sister is back, I suppose I can start."

"Yes, I should think so." Victor met her gaze again. "I'm honored that you waited for me."

"All right, Delia, we're back," Birdie said cheerfully as she joined them by the window. She looked at Victor, not bothering to disguise her interest. "Who is this?"

"This is Arthur's attorney," Cordelia said, gesturing to Victor with a smile. She hoped she wasn't blushing. Birdie had always been able to spot when she was flustered, even as a little girl, and teased her relentlessly about it. "Mr. Victor Pembroke, please meet my sister Bridget Ellison and her husband General Richard Ellison."

"Good evening," Victor said pleasantly. He shook the General's hand, and Cordelia was pleased to see that he took Birdie's hand but only clasped it for a moment and nodded at her. "I hope you're both looking forward to Lady Whittemore's recital this evening. She's quite the pianist."

"Oh yes," Birdie said, still smiling brightly. "She played beautifully when we were children. You've heard her play, Mr. Pembroke?"

"Only briefly when I was here on a business call to speak with Lord Whittemore. She was playing something that was far too simple for her, and I made sure to tell her so."

"I'm jealous," Birdie said. "I haven't even gotten to hear her play and I'm her sister." She stuck out her lower lip in a magnificent version of her childhood pout and Cordelia couldn't help laughing. "Are you going to play now?"

"Yes, yes, all right!" Cordelia threw up her hands in mock exasperation. "If you're all going to be on me about it I might as well start, hadn't I?" She went to the piano in the middle of the room and everyone seemed to grow quiet at the same time. Seeing her in place, Arthur broke away from the conversation he was having and went to her side.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said as if he were announcing a Broadway show, "thank you all for coming this evening. Even though it comes so closely after the death of my beloved father, Lord Whittemore, I'd like to welcome you all to our estate. My beautiful wife Cordelia has agreed to favor us with some music this evening and I'm sure you're all going to be enchanted with her playing." He turned to Cordelia. "So if it pleases you, my dear, you may begin anytime."

"Thank you," she said, smiling. She wasn't sure what to say to the partygoers, but her eyes went immediately to Victor and she felt a surge of warmth. Rather than stare at him any further, she cleared her throat and went to the piano.

When she sat down on the bench, a sudden wave of nervousness came over her and she was horrified to see that the hand she was using to open the music book was shaking. She'd played the songs she was about to perform over and over, but at that moment it felt like she'd never even looked at them before. She could feel everyone

looking at her and it only made her more nervous. Taking a deep breath, she put her fingers on the keys and began to play.

She started off with something a little slow, drawing the melody out of the air with her fingers on the keys as she pulled her audience in, and as she felt the room open up to her the jittery feeling she'd had faded away. This was what they had come to hear and she intended to give it to them. Somehow she knew Victor was watching her too and she hoped he was enjoying himself. She'd played this song often enough that she didn't need to turn the pages as she played, and before she knew it the song was over and the room was clapping for her.

She looked around the room and saw that her sister was clapping vigorously, as she'd expected, but was more pleased to see that Victor was doing the same. He was looking at her in a way that she could only describe as proud and she was glad of it. Her practicing had paid off after all.

The next piece was quite a bit faster and she'd only perfected it the day before so she was a little nervous, but as soon as she started she was enveloped in the music and everything else disappeared. Her polite but loveless marriage, the loneliness that crept up on her whenever she was anywhere but the conservatory, and the jealousy she couldn't hide when her sister spoke of her family. It was all gone the moment her fingers met the keys and she was happier than she'd been in months.

Cordelia was so lost in her own world that the applause she received when she finished the piece startled her a bit. She stood up from her seat to even louder applause and gave a small bow, surprised to feel how hard her heart was beating. Arthur was immediately by her side again, putting a hand on her waist.

"Thank you so much," he said. "Please enjoy the rest of the evening. I didn't want to mention it until after Cordelia's playing, but I've taken the liberty of setting up our phonograph in the dining hall if anyone would like to dance." This created a murmur of interest among the guests and Cordelia looked at him curiously. She hadn't known they owned a phonograph.

"When did we get a phonograph?" Her voice was soft so that no one else would hear it and Arthur shrugged, taking his hand off her waist.

"I've had one for quite some time, I just never took it out. Would you like to go over and listen to it? Perhaps dance with me?"

"All right," Cordelia said. She didn't really feel much like dancing with him but she didn't want to seem rude. For the hostess of the party to decline an invitation to dance by her own husband would be unthinkable, so she took his arm and followed him to the dining hall.

The long dining table with its numerous chairs had been removed earlier that day – Cordelia wasn't sure where to – and she did remember Arthur saying something about dancing but didn't recall anything else. She supposed she had been so nervous about playing that everything else had been pushed out of her mind. There was indeed a phonograph sitting in the corner of the room, and the butler was fitting a record onto the spindle.

"I thought this would be more interesting than hiring a band," Arthur said with a smile. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"It's definitely different," Cordelia said, watching the butler lower the arm on the phonograph carefully so as not to harm the record. A beautiful waltz came from the horn and people moved to the center of the floor to dance. "The sound is excellent."

"It is, isn't it?" He held out a hand to his wife. "Would you dance with me, Lady Whittemore?"

"Of course," she said. She took his hand and allowed him to lead her to the area near the phonograph where people were starting to dance.

Cordelia had always been a very good dancer and at her wedding she had been pleased to find that Arthur was fairly good as well. There was nothing she disliked more at a party than to find that her dance partner didn't know the steps or pushed her around uncomfortably. They moved around the makeshift dance floor gracefully, Cordelia's rose-colored dress breezing around her as Arthur spun her and she found herself smiling almost as much as when she was playing piano.

"How many songs are on this record?" Cordelia had very little idea of how a phonograph worked, but was interested in learning more about it. She supposed she could play a bit with it when she was alone during the day.

"I'm not sure," Arthur said. "They do have quite a capacity, I believe. Mr. Bates will be watching the needle to make sure we have the shortest possible interruption of course." The song ended and the guests looked around, unsure if they were supposed to clap like they would for a live band. "This is quite amusing," he said with a smile. "I had no idea."

"Pardon me," a voice said behind them, and both Arthur and Cordelia looked to find Victor standing at her shoulder. "I hope I'm not intruding, Arthur, but would you mind if I had this dance with Lady Whittemore?"

"No, not at all." He released his wife's hand and Victor took it, inclining his head slightly at Cordelia. "I'm going to speak to Lord Avery, my dear."

"Tell him I said I hope he enjoyed the music." She watched him go,

then turned to Victor, who put a hand on her hip in a way that was quite familiar but exceedingly pleasant. "And how about you, Mr. Pembroke? Did you enjoy the music?"

"It was fantastic," Victor said as the next song on the phonograph started its next song. "I didn't know that you'd attempt something as complicated as the second one so early in your career but I'm rather glad you did."

"My career?" Cordelia couldn't help laughing. "You flatter me, sir. There's nothing even resembling a career for me. It's merely a bit of fun for me in my spare time."

"Nonsense. You have the makings of a professional and I won't hear another word against it." Victor tightened his grip on her waist, then pulled her closer and stole her breath. "I'd love to hear you play again sometime soon. Perhaps a more *private* concert." He smiled, his eyes once again locked onto hers. "Just the two of us."

"Mr. Pembroke," Cordelia managed, "that's rather inappropriate."

"I know," he said, sending a blush into her cheeks that she felt all the way down her body. "That's what makes it enjoyable, isn't it?" Before she could even begin to think of a reply, he swept her sideways out of time of the music and spun her around. Cordelia's eyes widened in surprise and she could feel the looks of everyone else in the room as her feet actually left the ground for a moment. He was strong, far stronger than Arthur, and when he set her back down she discovered that he was a better dancer as well.

"My goodness," she said, wondering if she would ever stop blushing again. "You should have warned me you were going to do that!"

"What fun would that have been?" Victor leaned in a little closer and Cordelia resisted the urge to meet him halfway. *What am I doing? I'm a married woman, I can't be seen doing something like this.* Still, she let him come closer, wanting to hear what he had to say. "You don't seem to have much fun in your life."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm saying that I know a bit about your situation and I sympathize," he said, suddenly much less flirtatious than he'd been before. Cordelia's heart skipped a beat. *Does he mean he knows about Arthur?* She wanted to ask him what he meant but was afraid of what he might say.

"You---" The song ended just as she was about to speak and she fell silent, glad she hadn't blurted anything out when the music was absent. She was about to lower her voice and find out exactly what he knew when Richard came over with his customary smile.

"Cordelia," he said, then winked. "See, there, I said it! I just wanted to say how wonderful this party is and ask if you'd be so kind

as to favor an old man with a dance.” He turned his twinkling eyes to Victor. “You don’t mind, do you Mr. Pembroke?”

“Of course not,” Victor said, offering Cordelia’s hand to the general in spite of her great desire for him to keep holding it. “I’d like to have a look around this place while I’m here. I got a short tour while I was here the other day but I’m sure Lord Whittemore would be happy to show me about.” He nodded across the room where Arthur, to Cordelia’s dismay, was standing very close to a handsome young man. He was holding a glass of champagne and seemed far too interested in the young man, and Cordelia was glad to see Victor going over to him, if for no other reason than to protect her husband’s reputation. He didn’t seem willing to do it himself now that he’d had a bit to drink.

This is all so draining, Cordelia thought as she smiled up at Richard and another song came on the phonograph. *I don’t know that I was meant to keep a secret like this in my head.*

Though the party was intended to end at ten, Cordelia found herself still escorting guests out at nearly midnight. She was every bit the courteous hostess and chatted pleasantly with them on their way out the door but whenever she waved farewell to someone she found herself doing a mental inventory of who was still in the mansion and the best way to make them move along. She hadn’t seen her husband in more than an hour and she was afraid to even think about what that meant. Instead, she found herself wondering when Victor had left.

She was a little annoyed that he hadn’t bothered to say goodbye to her, and even more annoyed that she hadn’t had another chance to talk to him and find out what he knew about Arthur. It was true that her husband seemed to have been more indiscreet lately but for her sister to come to her with rumors and Victor to come right out and say something about it, it meant that other people were starting to take note of it.

With a sigh, she turned and went back into the mansion. The phonograph was still playing in the makeshift ballroom but no one was dancing, and Cordelia decided that turning it off was likely serve as a good indication to people that were still there that the party was well and truly over.

As she went up the steps to the house, two men walked past her and raised their hands in greeting but didn’t stop. Grateful to them for this, Cordelia smiled politely and bade them goodnight as she made her way toward the dining room.

There was no one in the dining room and she searched the phonograph for an ‘off’ switch for a moment before discovering it on the side of the device, and as soon as she did the music slowed and stopped. She seemed to recall seeing the arm of the thing off to the side, so she carefully picked the needle up off the record and moved it

to the side. That done, she expected silence to fill the room but was surprised to hear voices in the back hallway that led to the kitchens. Sighing at the thought of more people to chivvy out the front door and wondering what on earth people were doing all the way back there, Cordelia put on her best hostess smile and went into the hallway only to have her smile slide off her face when she saw who it was.

Victor didn't see her at first, though she hardly could have expected him to with his face pressed against the side of Patricia's neck. Her blonde hair had come partially undone from its bun and curls of it were brushing against his cheek. He was saying something that Cordelia couldn't hear, but Patricia was giggling, which probably had more to do with the fact that his hand was under her skirt, pushing it up far enough for Cordelia to see the tops of her socks.

"Excuse me," Cordelia said, snapping both of their faces in her direction. Patricia's eyes widened and Victor pulled his hand away so her dress fell back down to cover her. "The party ended two hours ago. One of you needs to leave and the other has work to do." She looked at Patricia. "Unless you would like to leave together. In which case I shall have to find a new maid."

"No ma'am, I'm so sorry," Patricia said, her cheeks bright. "Excuse me." She turned her eyes to the ground and hurried away in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Cordelia alone with Victor.

"I trust you can see yourself out without accosting any more of my servants?" Her voice was frosty as she addressed him, then turned on her heel and started back down the hallway. She didn't care what he might be up to, she was going to find Arthur and make him clear out the rest of the guests. As far as she was concerned, Cordelia was finished for the night.

"Lady Whittemore," Victor called after her as she stalked down the main hallway looking for her husband. "Please, wait a moment."

"I've nothing to say to you," she said without looking at him.

"At least allow me to finish what I was saying earlier," he began just as Arthur came down the stairs, blessedly alone. Cordelia motioned to Victor, her eyes narrowed.

"Arthur dear, I've got a bit of a headache. Could you see Mr. Pembroke out?"

"Of course, my darling," Arthur said. "I shall send Mrs. Richmond up after you with a cool cloth as well." He patted her hand gently, then turned to Victor. "Did you bring your horse?" The two men walked away together and Cordelia thought she saw Victor try to look back at her before she stormed up the stairs with her fists balled into her skirts. Leave it to a man to ruin a perfectly lovely evening.

Chapter 5

The day after the party Victor found himself at his office thinking about what had happened the night before. He sighed as he pushed away the motion he was working on and tossed his pen on top of it. This wouldn't do, not at all.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Pembroke?"

"What?" Victor looked over at the door to his office, surprised to find his assistant Bradley looking in at him. He looked at the clock on the wall and was even more surprised to find that it was almost noon. "No, no, everything's fine."

"You looked like something was on your mind," the boy said, coming in to hand him a telegram. "Either that or you had indigestion."

"Probably too much coffee," Victor said with a laugh. "Damn Harlow for getting me to drink the stuff in the first place." He took the telegram from the boy's hand and picked up a letter opener. "Thank you, Bradley, that will be all."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to bring you some coffee?"

"Out!" Victor was barely able to hold back his laughter as Bradley hurried back into the hallway. "And pour out that damn coffee!" He couldn't actually get mad at the boy, he was Judge Wellington's son. Half the reason he'd agreed to take him on was so that the judge would overlook his former partner's part in the disastrous will the late Lord Whittemore had filed.

He had a pretty good idea of why the old man had put it in his will that for his son to remain Lord Whittemore he would have to remain married long enough to produce an heir, especially since he frequented the pubs. Not so much for drinking, though he did enjoy his share of pints on occasion, more to hear the gossip that was passed back and forth. Drinking too much often got him in trouble.

Take for example the night before. He'd had an extremely enjoyable time talking to Lady Whittemore and had particularly liked dancing with her. She was an excellent dancer and from what he'd seen, her skill was wasted on her husband. If what he'd heard at the

pub was true, there was quite a bit about her that was wasted on him. He'd had trouble keeping his mind off her the rest of the evening and found himself looking casually around to see if she might be nearby, but once he'd gotten a few good drinks in him courtesy of the current Lord Whittemore's serving staff he'd found himself in a position he'd found pleasurable at the time but was now beginning to regret.

"Excuse me, Mr. Pembroke?"

"Bradley, I thought I told you to go pour out that coffee." Victor leaned back in his chair and put a hand over his eyes.

"A telegram just came for you."

"I know, Bradley, you've just handed it to me." He held up the still-unopened telegram and Bradley shook his head.

"That's the wrong telegram. It's actually for Mr. Avery down the road. The delivery boy got the address wrong," Bradley said, coming into the office to give Victor a second envelope. Sighing heavily, Victor handed him the first envelope in return.

"It's Lord Avery, actually."

"Oh. Yes of course. Thank you sir," Bradley said, pointing at the door. "I'll just go pour out the coffee now."

Once the boy was gone, Victor opened the telegram and scanned it to make sure it was actually for him, then frowned. He'd sent a letter to his friend in London a week ago and the man was just now getting back to him. It was times like these that he wished he had access to a telephone. Another sigh escaped Victor's lips as he stood up and put on his suit coat.

Greenley could accurately be described as a small town if one wanted to be kind about it, but in Victor's eyes it was little more than a wide place in the road. Being from London originally, he wasn't used to having to go to the Royal Mail office in order to send a telegram rather than making a phone call. His practice in London had a phone but before his rather unexpected death Phillip Harlow had refused to allow him to put one in their office. Not even the doctor in town had one, which seemed like a terrible oversight to Victor.

"Afternoon, Mr. Pembroke," the postman said when he walked into the Royal Mail office. "What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"I need to send a telegram," Victor said, trying not to sigh again. "Unless you can magically make a telephone appear."

"No sir," the postman said, shaking his head. "Most people in Greenley are lucky to have gotten indoor lighting. To whom do you want to send a telegram?"

"Judge Ronald Perkins, in London. Tell him it's too complicated and would breach privilege to put in a telegram and that I'll meet with him in London in, let's say, a week to discuss it further." He took out his wallet and pushed a pound note across the counter. The postman's

eyes widened.

“Good lord, sir, that’s far too much!”

“Keep the rest of it for yourself and don’t tell anyone you sent that telegram, or about the contents of the previous telegram.” The last part was unnecessary. Judge Perkins had been concise and vague, as befitted a member of the court, but one could never be too careful when dealing with the law and nobility. Leaving the postman still groping for words, he turned and went back outside. Instead of going back to his office, he went to the stable to get his horse.

Yet another inconvenience, he thought irritably. *In London they’re probably all driving around in automobiles now.*

As he rode out to the Whittemore estate he found himself thinking about Cordelia again. The estate was rather far from Greenley and he couldn’t recall ever seeing her in town. He wondered if she ever got out of the mansion or if she was stuck there all the time. It was unlikely that she’d ride into town like her husband but there was nothing saying she couldn’t come in the carriage.

She didn’t seem like the type of woman who would enjoy country living, which led him to believe that she’d been married off to Arthur by her parents. The same fate had likely befallen her sister, though she seemed much happier with the General than Cordelia did with her husband. The Ellisons could scarcely keep their eyes off each other, even with the age difference, whereas he couldn’t recall seeing more than the barest hint of affection between Lord and Lady Whittemore.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pembroke,” the stablemaster said as he rode up to the estate. “It’s good to see you again. Is Lord Whittemore expecting you?”

“He’s not,” Victor said, “but he’s going to want to speak to me. He just doesn’t know it yet.” He dismounted and patted his horse affectionately, then took his satchel from where he’d secured it to the saddle and handed the reins to the stablemaster, who nodded at him. “Thank you.”

“You just let me know when you’re ready for him again, sir.”

Victor walked the rest of the way up to the mansion, looking around at the perfectly manicured garden along the way. It was a beautiful house with equally beautiful grounds, an elegant cage for a young bird who didn’t seem to know there was anything different. The carved wooden door opened as he came up the stairs and the old, strict-looking woman he knew as Mrs. Richmond flicked her eyes over him and didn’t smile.

“Good afternoon,” she said tightly. “I assume you’re here to see Lord Whittemore?”

“I am,” Victor said, giving her one of his most winning smiles. “I’ve got some important business to discuss with him regarding his father’s

estate.”

“Very well. Follow me.”

Mrs. Richmond led him down the hall and somewhere in the house he could hear Cordelia playing the piano. It was a spirited piece that sounded like a companion to the one she’d played at the party and he wished he could take a moment to go listen and possibly try to explain his behavior to her. Victor had never felt the need to explain his behavior to anyone but he wanted to at least tell her he was sorry. Then he looked at Mrs. Richmond and knew the likelihood of getting near Cordelia without her or Arthur was slim.

The doors to Arthur’s study were closed when they reached it and Mrs. Richmond knocked sharply on it. Victor had no doubt that her knock could be heard as far down as the root cellar, and a moment later Arthur opened the door. When he saw Victor, his face broke into a grin.

“Well, hello there Victor! This is a surprise. What brings you out here?” He reached out to Victor and the two men shook hands.

“I wanted to speak to you about your father’s estate. It’s a private matter,” Victor said, lowering his voice. He didn’t need to. Mrs. Richmond had already turned away and gone off to wherever she went when she wasn’t giving everyone suspicious looks.

“Of course, of course. Come on in.” Arthur led him into the study and shut the door behind him, locking it to be safe. “Have you had news from your judge friend in London?”

“Nothing useful, I’m afraid. He said he might have some thoughts on it but neither of us wanted to put it in something so public as a telegram just in case someone gets a bit too nosy. I’m planning on meeting him in London next week to discuss it further. Unfortunately that’s going to have to go to your expenses, I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course it is. I trust you’ll take care of things properly.” Arthur sighed and looked up at the oil painting of his father that was above the desk. “This has all gotten out of hand. I can’t believe I agreed to such a foolish thing but I suppose there’s nothing for it now.”

“Does Lady Whittemore know?”

“About Father’s will? No, not yet. I was hoping not to have to tell her until we had better news. Sort of give her the bad news followed by telling her we’d sorted it out. She still has some hope that she’ll be able to get out of this.” He looked at Victor. “I trust you’ll be able to handle the divorce?”

“Yes, I believe so. You’re willing to grant it to her, I doubt the courts will be any trouble.” Victor joined him in looking up at the painting. He’d never actually met the late Lord Whittemore but judging from his will he couldn’t imagine that he was pleasant to be around. If he was going to be honest, the man seemed like a petty old

bastard. "She may have some trouble getting remarried, though."

"Oh?" Arthur looked alarmed at this. "Why is that?"

"Most men aren't interested in a divorced woman," Victor said with a shrug. "They see her as being ruined by her first husband. Not to mention they're usually to blame for the divorce. Husbands don't just let their wives out of a marriage without a reason."

"I see," Arthur said. "I'd never even considered that. I've caused so many problems for her, I intend to take care of her until she's able to remarry but I don't want people to look at her badly."

"I'm sure you have your reasons," Victor said, letting his sentence dangle slightly in the hopes Arthur would tell him exactly why he wanted to divorce his wife. When he didn't oblige, Victor shrugged. "In any case, I'll do my best to get things sorted out for you. We're simply going to have to be patient."

"I know. For her sake, I just hope it'll be soon," Arthur said. There was a knock at the study door and both men looked in its direction. "Yes?"

"Excuse me, sir," the butler said, putting his head into the study, "but there's a gentleman downstairs who says he needs to speak with you about the stable."

"Oh, lovely," Arthur said sarcastically. "I'm sure it's good news."

"I'm sure," Victor said. "I'll leave you to your stable problems. I can see myself out, I remember the way." Arthur nodded and extended his hand. Victor shook it with a smile, then opened the door and went out into the hallway.

He did indeed remember the way out of the mansion, seeing as how he had been escorted out only the night before. Arthur had been kind about it, far kinder than he felt Lady Whittemore would have been given her reaction to finding him with the maid, and Victor doubted he even knew why Cordelia was asking him to be shown the door. He got the feeling that Arthur didn't refuse his wife much, probably because he knew that divorcing her was in the future and he was trying to make it up to her in advance. Victor sighed. Rich people had troubles he could scarcely dream of, but the retainer he was getting paid made dealing with them worthwhile.

On his way out, his ears caught the sound of the most beautiful piano music he'd ever heard. Victor automatically turned toward it, drawn by the notes and the thought of seeing Cordelia again. There was something about her that had gotten under his skin in a way that no other woman had, and the desire to see her again was like a drug.

He found her in the room that had been converted into a conservatory, sitting at the piano. The piece she was playing was melancholy, slow and deliberate, and he could just about feel the emotion she was putting into each note. Like some people wore their

hearts on their sleeves, Cordelia showed hers in her music. He wondered just how much she knew or suspected of her husband's plans after all. She didn't seem like an unintelligent woman.

Victor wasn't sure how long he stood there listening to her play, but it couldn't have been long. She turned suddenly from the keys and looked at him, her eyes widening slightly and then narrowing when she saw who it was. There was a fire in them that he rarely saw in a woman, and in spite of the fact that her husband could walk in at any moment, he felt the rush of wanting to possess her.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said, and though her words were polite he could feel they were shot through with ice. "Have you come to see my husband? I believe he's in his study." She turned back to her piano. "Very rude of the staff to let you simply wander about our manor. I shall have a word with them."

"I already saw Lord Whittemore," Victor said. "He had to meet with someone and asked if I could see myself out. Then I heard your playing and wanted to come and hear more."

"I see. Well, no one's stopping you." She turned back around and put her fingers on the keys, then began to play. The room was again filled with the rich notes that he'd heard before, and Victor moved closer to her as if he was in a trance. Cordelia didn't seem to notice him and he stood over her shoulder, close enough to see the pages of sheet music she was reading from. It didn't surprise him to see that her playing didn't match what was on the page, but he was impressed that she was working from memory. Cordelia looked over her shoulder and jumped, startled, when she saw how close he was. With a growl of irritation, she slapped her hands on the keys and stood up. "What are you still doing here?"

"You said I could stay and listen." They were separated by the piano bench but he could feel the anger radiating off Cordelia as she looked at him. "Permit me to be rude for a moment, but why are you so angry at me?"

"If you don't know the answer, I'm certainly not going to be the one to tell you." Cordelia snatched the sheet music off the piano and pushed past him. Not even realizing what he was doing until he felt her skin under his hand, Victor reached out and grabbed her upper arm.

"Lady Whittemore---"

"Don't you touch me," Cordelia snapped. She jerked her arm away from him, dropping her sheet music in the process. Her cheeks filled with color as she knelt down to scoop it up. "Go," she said without looking up at him. "Just go. Get out of my house."

"All right, all right," Victor said, holding up his hands. "I'll speak to you about our business when I come back to see your husband."

“I have no business with you,” Cordelia said, holding her mixed-up stack of sheet music to her chest. “Good day, sir.” She stalked past him, nearly running into Patricia on her way out the door. Cordelia glared at the younger woman for a moment, then turned back to Victor with a dangerous smile. “Please show Mr. Pembroke out, Patricia. If you’re able to find the door, that is.”

As soon as Cordelia was gone, Patricia looked at Victor. Her cheeks were even redder than her mistress’ had been and she was unable to meet Victor’s eyes. For his part, the passion he’d felt for the girl the night before was completely gone. She was still attractive to him but in the light of day he could tell that she was quite a bit younger than he’d thought after a few drinks, and his only interest in her at the moment was her ability to show him to the door.

“May I show you out, sir?”

“No need,” Victor said. “I know the way.” He walked past her, ignoring the crestfallen look on her face, and started down the hallway toward the door. It somehow felt longer than it had the night before and he glanced at the stairs as he opened the door to leave. If Cordelia had gone up them, she was long gone. Victor sighed. This family was more trouble than it was worth.

Chapter 6

“Lady Whittemore, your sister is here to see you.”

“Oh?” Cordelia looked up from the book she was reading, surprised. “I wasn’t expecting her. Please, tell her to come in.” The maid bowed her head slightly and stepped out of the study, leaving Cordelia alone. She hadn’t seen much of Patricia in the week since she’d ordered Victor out of her house and she was halfway convinced that the girl was avoiding her. *So much for her being my lady’s maid*, she thought. *She can’t help me dress if she can’t even look at me.*

Cordelia slipped a bookmark between the pages of the novel she was reading and set it aside just as Birdie came through the door. She was followed by a man carrying a large trunk that was almost as big as him and Cordelia stood up.

“Birdie, what on earth have you brought into my house?”

“Mother found them in the attic when she was searching for, well, whatever Mother was looking for this time. I thought you might like to have them.” The man set the trunk on the floor and Birdie smiled at him. “Thank you, Robert. That will be all.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded at Cordelia, then left the sisters alone together in the study.

“You still haven’t said what they are,” Cordelia said as Birdie dropped to her knees in front of the trunk and flipped open the latches.

“Our old dress-up clothes!” Birdie reached into the trunk and pulled out a ratty fur stole and a ball gown that looked like it had seen better days. “Look, it’s Grandmother’s dress! And there’s the pirate costume you used to wear, and the cowgirl hat Father brought back from America.”

“These bring back so many wonderful memories,” Cordelia said, taking the hat from her sister and turning it around with a smile. “My goodness. I can’t believe we ever fit into these things.” She looked down at Birdie. “These are wonderful, darling, but why would you drag them all the way out here? I could have just seen them when I came to visit you.”

"You never come to visit me," Birdie grumbled. "Besides, I thought you might like to have them. I don't have any use for them right now with only a boy who's much too large for them and you have so much more room. There are some baby clothes in there too, in case you have a little girl."

"I'm not even pregnant yet," Cordelia said, thinking about how unlikely it was that she was ever going to get pregnant. "What if our first child is a boy?"

"You can just hold onto them until you have a girl, then. If I have a girl, she can come play dress-up with her cousin." Birdie leaned back over the trunk and Cordelia looked at the hat wistfully. The way things were going, her imaginary niece wouldn't have anyone to dig through the trunk with, fighting over who got to wear a fairy costume and who got to be the princess. "Oh? What's this?" Birdie reached into the trunk and pulled something out.

"What is it?" Cordelia leaned over and Birdie held up an intricately worked necklace with ocean blue stones set into it. "Is that Grandmother's necklace?"

"The one she thought was stolen by that maid who disappeared," Birdie said, nodding. "I guess we were playing with it and it fell in there." She handed the necklace to Cordelia. "You should have it, Delia. Grandmother always did like you best."

"Don't be silly," Cordelia said, looking at the necklace in the light. It was a little tarnished but the jewels sparkled in the sun coming through the window. "It's quite beautiful. We should send it to Mother and see what she wants to do with it."

"She'll probably tell you to keep it," Birdie said, standing up and closing the trunk. "It was no secret that Grandmother loved you more than any of the other girls. She was sure you'd be the one to marry someone high in society, and look at you. Married to a Lord."

"I suppose." Cordelia curled her fingers around the necklace. She wanted so badly to tell her sister about Arthur and what she'd caught him doing, but the last thing she needed was for her beloved little sister to look at her with pity in her eyes. "I haven't seen you since the party, Birdie. Did you enjoy the music?"

"Yours or the phonograph?" Birdie grinned, the freckles sprinkled across her nose making her look even younger. "I'm just joking, Delia. Your playing was wonderful. I wanted to listen to it all night. I can't believe you've gotten so good so quickly."

"It's all just coming back to me," Cordelia said. She gently set the necklace on the table between the two chairs that faced the fireplace. It was too warm for a fire but there was still wood in the hearth. "You're not the only one to say that, though."

"Really?"

“Yes. Arthur’s lawyer commented on it as well,” Cordelia said, hoping she sounded casual. Mad though she still was, she couldn’t stop thinking about him. “Did I introduce you to him?”

“Oh yes, before the dancing began,” Birdie said. She flopped down on the chair beside the table in a very unladylike manner and picked up the necklace. “My, this is pretty. I’m beginning to rethink my giving it to you. Finders keepers and all.”

“If you’d rather have it, by all means do.”

“Don’t be so serious, Delia!” She shook her head, then looked at the necklace as she turned it around. “Mr. Pembroke,” she said thoughtfully. “Mr. Pembroke. I know I heard someone talking about him when I was at the party.”

“Honestly,” Cordelia said with a huff, “you spend far too much time listening to what other people say about each other.” She was fighting with herself about whether or not she should ask Birdie what it was she’d heard about Victor. She didn’t want to appear too interested in him but she also didn’t want her sister to stop talking about him. Thankfully, Birdie was never one to pass up the chance to spread some gossip.

“From what I heard, he has a terrible reputation in society circles. He showed up in town out of nowhere with no family and he’s a real ladies’ man according to the gentleman my husband was talking to. I heard he shows up with a different woman at every party he’s invited to.” Birdie turned her attention to her sister, still toying with the necklace while Cordelia knelt in front of the dress-up trunk. “Who did he bring to your party? I saw him dancing with you but I didn’t see his date.”

“I don’t know that he brought anyone,” Cordelia said, unlatching the trunk and opening it. “We didn’t speak much, to be honest.” She thought of the way he had danced with her, the way he had spun her around and how much fun it had been to let go of her worries for just a moment. “I believe he came late as well.”

“Maybe he had a fight with his date,” Birdie said. “That wouldn’t surprise me if it’s true that he’s got a new one every week. Still, coming to a party late with no date and spending all your time drinking? If he didn’t already have a reputation, he’s getting one now.”

“He’s very good-looking, isn’t he?” She said this while looking into the trunk, hoping that she looked disinterested enough that her sister wouldn’t notice her cheeks had turned red.

“I certainly think so,” Birdie said with a grin. “Those eyes of his are positively breathtaking. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen eyes so blue. If I weren’t married, I don’t think I would mind spending some time with him.”

“Birdie!”

“Well, I would!” She folded her arms over her chest and gave her sister a petulant look. “I wouldn’t turn him away if he wanted to kiss me, that’s for sure.” Cordelia was trying to come up with a response to this when there was a light knock on the door and Mrs. Richmond stuck her head in.

“Good afternoon, ladies. It’s come to my attention that no one has offered you tea, Bridget.” She shot Cordelia a look that clearly said it was her responsibility to have called for tea. “Would you care for some?”

“Okay,” Birdie said with a shrug. “That would be nice.”

“Excellent. I shall have Patricia bring it in with a selection of biscuits.” She left almost soundlessly and Birdie sighed.

“I don’t know how you handle being around her all day, I really don’t. Shouldn’t she have retired by now?” Birdie got up from her chair and went over to one of the bookshelves and started looking at the books.

“You and I both know that will never happen,” Cordelia said, reaching into the trunk and feeling around the corners just in case there were any other hidden treasures lurking at the bottom. “If she passes away in her sleep, her ghost will come to the breakfast table to nag me about leaving the duvet in a mess.” Not finding anything of interest in the trunk, she closed it again and latched it. “Mr. Pembroke has been here an awful lot lately. I hope everything’s going all right with his father’s estate.”

“What could possibly be wrong with it? He’s passed away and Arthur was his only child, everything goes to him. That’s just how it works, right?” One of the books on entomology had found its way into Birdie’s hand and she turned it over.

“I always thought so,” Cordelia said. “But who knows what goes on with men and their affairs. Lord Whittemore was a difficult man, there may have been some sort of problem with the will. Arthur said before that---” Cordelia clipped off the end of her sentence before she could get the rest of it out, hoping that Birdie hadn’t heard it. Her little sister was busy examining a diagram of a giant beetle and Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn’t believe what she’d almost said.

“What possesses a person to study bugs their entire life?” Birdie turned the page. “They’re fascinating creatures but there’s only so much one can discover about them.” She looked up at Cordelia. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that last bit.”

“It was nothing,” Cordelia said, shaking her head. “Nothing at all.” The door opened again and Patricia, who had been walking on eggshells around Cordelia since the night of the party, came in with the tea tray. She set it down on the table between the wing chairs,

avoiding Cordelia's eyes as she did, and looked at Birdie.

"I brought petits fours instead of biscuits, ma'am," she said. "I hope that's all right."

"That's perfect," Birdie said, snapping the book shut but not putting it back on the shelf. She brought it with her to the chair and wedged it between the cushion and the arm. "I'm going to take this home. I think Walter would really enjoy reading it. Do you think Arthur would mind?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't," Cordelia said, watching Patricia arrange the tea with her eyes on the ground. "I don't know that he ever read the thing. He collects books because he takes interest in a subject, then forgets he ever had them." Patricia met Cordelia's eyes for a moment, then hurried for the door. "Oh for heaven's sake," Cordelia sighed. She turned to her sister. "Would you excuse me a moment, darling sister? I need to have a word with my staff."

"Of course," Birdie said, reaching for the teapot. "I'll help myself to one of these lovely-looking cakes while you do."

While Birdie went about picking out her cake, Cordelia went into the hall to look for Patricia. The girl moved quickly, she would give her that. Thinking that she would have likely gone back to the kitchen Cordelia followed that path until she caught up with her just outside the kitchen.

"Patricia," she said sternly, and the girl flinched. "I would like to speak with you."

"Yes, ma'am," Patricia said, coming toward her with her head down. "Are you going to dismiss me, ma'am?"

"Of course not," Cordelia said, trying not to sound as impatient as she felt. "However, we can't continue the way we have been since the party. I apologize for being short with you and I should have addressed this sooner but---"

"I'm so sorry, Lady Whittemore," Patricia interrupted. "Mr. Pembroke convinced me to have a drink with him and I completely lost my head! I don't know what came over me, I promise it won't happen again! Please don't dismiss me, my mother would be so ashamed."

"I'm not going to dismiss you," Cordelia sighed. "I will ask you to use more discretion in future, though. No more drinking while you're working, either, no matter what Mr. Pembroke says."

"Yes, ma'am," Patricia said, nodding vigorously. "Of course. Thank you, ma'am!" Her smile faltered for a moment and she picked up the edge of the apron she was wearing and fiddled with it. "May I tell you something in confidence?"

"Of course," Cordelia said with a smile. She really did like the girl, and she was an excellent maid. The last thing she wanted was to lose

an excellent worker because she was acting like a jealous schoolgirl over a man she had no right to. "Please feel free."

"It's about your husband," Patricia said quietly, glancing toward the kitchen to make sure no one else was listening. Cordelia's stomach clenched and she motioned for Patricia to follow her away from the kitchen. They stepped into a side room that was closer to the study and Cordelia closed the door.

"Now, what's the matter?"

"I was upstairs gathering the bedclothes for the wash and I heard sounds in Lord Whittemore's room. I assumed it was you and him having a, um, a private moment so I started to hurry off. Then I heard a *man's* voice, and it wasn't Lord Whittemore. And then I saw you down here with your sister and, well, I'm afraid one thing led to another in my mind." Patricia's face was even redder than it had been when Cordelia caught her with Victor and she looked away. "I'm sorry if that was indiscreet."

"Not at all," Cordelia said, her anger flaring. "You're not the one who's been indiscreet. I thank you for coming to me with this, Patricia, and I would appreciate if you didn't speak of it to anyone else."

"Oh no, ma'am, not at all!" She looked shocked that Cordelia would even suggest it and her anger at Arthur was tempered slightly by her renewed affection for the girl. "I should get back to the kitchen, ma'am. If there's anything you need, please call for me." Patricia hurried out the door and Cordelia went after her, then looked over her shoulder on the way to the study.

"Patricia?" The girl stopped in her tracks and turned back to Cordelia, who smiled at her. "How would you like to learn to become my lady's maid?"

"I'd like that very much!" Patricia's face shone with joy and Cordelia laughed.

"All right, then. Speak to Mrs. Richmond at once and she'll make the arrangements. I must return to my sister." She turned and went back to the study, her blood boiling as she did. If it weren't for the fact that Birdie was waiting for her to return and have tea she would have marched upstairs immediately and told him exactly what she thought of him.

When she opened the door to the study, however, Birdie was already finishing the last of her tea as she stood over the tray. The book on insects was cradled in her arm and her gloves were on. She set the teacup down and turned to her sister.

"I'm sorry to eat all your cakes and run," Birdie said, causing Cordelia to look down at the plate and see that both petit fours had indeed been reduced to crumbs. "I was looking through this book and

saw something about a particular beetle whose shell reminded me of a ribbon I saw at the notions shop the last time I was here. I'd like to get some before I'm on my way home."

"Be sure to bring me some next time you come," Cordelia said. "I'd love to see this beetle ribbon for myself." They walked together toward the door and Birdie smiled.

"Why don't you come to the shop with me? I could show it to you myself if they still have it. It's really very pretty." She opened the book to a page she had turned down the corner on. Cordelia knew Arthur would have had plenty to say about this if he saw it but at the moment she couldn't make herself care. "See, it's this pretty shade of green."

"Oh, yes, it's quite nice," Cordelia said, only half looking at the picture. "I'd love to have a gown that color. Something like that would look lovely with your hair as well." They had reached the front door by this point and Cordelia opened it. "Wouldn't you prefer for me to call for the stable master to get your carriage ready?"

"I can walk over myself," Birdie said, showing off both her independent streak and her impatience at the same time. "I'll just hold up my skirts so they don't get muddy. My driver should be somewhere out there. He used to work in our stables so he enjoys spending time around the horses."

"If you're sure then," Cordelia said, her mind more on her husband than her sister for once. She didn't have time to try and tell her sister that she needed to be more ladylike at the moment, and Birdie probably wouldn't have listened anyway. "Just don't let Mrs. Richmond see you, or I'll never hear the end of it."

"Of course not, dear sister." Grinning, Birdie leaned forward and kissed her sister on the cheek. "I'll come and see you again soon."

"Please do." Cordelia lingered by the door long enough to watch her sister go down the steps, then pull up her skirt to the tops of her boots and start across the damp ground toward the stables. Shaking her head, she closed the door. If Mrs. Richmond knew she had so much as seen Birdie stomping around the yard showing off her legs, she would somehow be the one to get the lecture.

Once she was certain her sister was far enough away not to hear anything, Cordelia turned on her heel and headed to the stairs. She held herself back from taking them two at a time, but only just. When she got to Arthur's bedroom she didn't bother knocking or listening to see if anyone was still inside, she grabbed the knob and twisted as hard as she could, not surprised to find that it was locked. Not caring what anyone else in the house thought, she pounded on the door as hard as she could. On the other side, she heard footsteps coming toward it and steeled herself for what she was about to see. Arthur

opened the door cautiously, his shirt open and pants unbuttoned.

"Cordelia," he said, sounding breathless. Over his shoulder she could see a young man hurriedly dressing. He looked familiar to Cordelia but she couldn't quite place him. "Darling, I thought you were visiting with your sister."

"You promised me you would keep this out of our house!" Arthur flinched at the sound of her raised voice and made a shushing motion at her.

"Calm down," he said, his voice quiet. "Someone will hear you."

"I don't care if the people in town hear me," Cordelia snapped. "This is honestly the last straw, Arthur! I've put up with this long enough. I can't believe I even agreed to overlook this!"

"Excuse me," the young man mumbled as he pushed past Arthur and Cordelia. He'd managed to get himself dressed quickly, which made Cordelia wonder how often he'd been doing this. She hardly paid attention to him as he hurried away from the bedroom toward the stairs.

"Please be quiet," Arthur said. "I don't want the staff hearing our private business."

"I'm surprised it's even private business at this point," Cordelia snapped. "If you're bringing your lovers in and out of the house in broad daylight, how do you think the staff hasn't figured it out already? I wouldn't be surprised if everyone in town knows. What do you think they're saying about me?"

"Cordelia, please. If we're going to discuss this, can we please just come into my room?" His voice was pleading at this point and Cordelia folded her arms over her chest.

"I don't care who hears me. You broke your promise to me, now I'm breaking mine. I want a divorce immediately and I'll go to the judge and tell them exactly what you've been doing. I'll just leave out the bit that I've known for months." She turned and started to walk away, but Arthur grabbed her arm in much the same way Victor had in the conservatory. "Let go of me! Why does every man think they can just put their hands on me whenever they like?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Arthur let go of her and she rounded on him.

"Just don't touch me," Cordelia said. "I'm through with this charade. It ends this instant. If you won't grant me the divorce I'm going to make sure everyone knows what you're up to and the judge will give me the divorce anyhow."

"Please listen to me for just a moment," Arthur said. "Then you can do whatever you want."

"Fine," Cordelia said, hands on her hips. "I'm listening."

"My father's will states that if I don't remain married I'll lose

everything. My title, the estate, everything I've inherited from him will go to charity and I'll be destitute," Arthur said. "I'm trying to find a way around it but it takes time. The will is legally binding so far as Mr. Pembroke has been able to see so far, and if a judge found out about my indiscretions he would most certainly rule against me."

"Spare me your sad story," Cordelia said. "What about *my* life? How do you expect me to go on pretending we have a marriage? It seems that you get to do whatever you want and I have to be a good wife and turn a blind eye to it all."

"I'm thinking of you as well, I promise," Arthur said. "If I lose everything, you get nothing as well. You can go back to your parents' house but you won't get anything from me to hold you over until you can find another husband."

"I don't---"

"If you just give me a bit of time to try and find a way to bypass Father's conditions I'll take care of you for the rest of your life, even if you find a new husband. I've already put it down in my own will that you'll get everything you need." He reached out as if to touch her face and Cordelia jerked her head away from him. "Please, Cordelia. I do care for you."

"If you cared for me at all, you wouldn't have put me in this position," she said. "Do whatever you want. I'll be in town. I don't want to spend another moment under this roof with you right now." This time when she turned away Arthur didn't try to stop her and Cordelia went to her room and snatched a hat from her closet without looking to see if it matched her dress. She crammed it on her head without bothering with a hatpin or considering what it would do to her hair, then picked up her pocketbook and went to the stairs, passing Arthur as she did.

"Don't do this, Cordelia, please!"

She didn't answer him as she nearly ran down the stairs, flung open the front door and walked across the yard in much the same fashion as her sister, only without holding up her skirts. She didn't care about her dress or whether or not Mrs. Richmond saw her, only that she could get away from the estate and Arthur as quickly as possible.

"Pardon me," she said sharply as she walked into the stable. The stable master jumped up from the chair where he had been sitting. "I need a driver to take me to town at once."

"I can fetch him for you," the stable master said. "I believe he's in the servant's quarters." He turned to his apprentice. "Hitch the horse up to milady's carriage immediately." To Cordelia he said "If you give us a few minutes we can polish it up for you too."

"I don't care what it looks like," Cordelia said. "It can be covered

in mud for all I care. Just get me someone to take me to town and do it now."

"Yes, ma'am!" The stable master ran for the servant's quarters while his apprentice hurried the other way to get the carriage ready.

Cordelia stood in the stable, surrounded by the rich smell of the hay and the sharp aroma of the floor of the stalls and tried to hold her breath. As overwhelming as the combined smell was, she wanted to go back to the house even less than she wanted to stay in the stable and she looked around. The horses were beautiful. They were one of the things she would be giving up if she exposed her husband and she stepped forward to brush her fingers across a horse's face.

It came to her then that her sister was still somewhere in town, looking at fabrics. She couldn't just wander around Greenley as angry as she was. Who knew what she would let slip if she did. She didn't want to stay at the estate either. Cordelia racked her brain, trying to figure out where she could go and what she would do in town that wouldn't put her directly in Birdie's path.

She suddenly realized that there *was* someone she could talk to, and though she was already angry with him she needed to see him at once. Arthur said Victor Pembroke was helping him with his father's will, and that meant that Victor knew exactly what was going on. The thought ignited a new spark of anger in her chest and she looked around impatiently for the stable master.

I'm going right down there to give him a piece of my mind, she thought as the carriage driver and stable master hurried toward her. *I don't care who hears me this time, I am finished with this nonsense once and for all.*

Chapter 7

“**A**re you all right, sir? You look rather tired.”

“I’m fine,” Victor said, stifling a yawn. “I just got in late last night, that’s all.” He could smell a pot of coffee brewing elsewhere in his office and he raised an eyebrow at his assistant. “Bradley, I thought it forbade you to make any of that ever again.”

“I’m sorry sir, but I’ve developed a taste for it myself.” Bradley handed Victor a stack of papers. “There’s the files you asked for.”

“Thank you.”

“If I might be so nosy, what were you doing that got you in so late?” He grinned at Victor. “Spent too much time at the pub? Took a young lady home?”

“My train got in extremely late from London,” Victor said with a smirk. It seemed he’d gotten quite the reputation in town already and in spite of Bradley’s impertinence he couldn’t quite bring himself to say he’d been somewhere he shouldn’t. The last thing he wanted was to get into a discussion with the boy about his private life. He had always been able to separate it from his work, even if the people he worked with were inclined to gossip about him behind his back. It rarely troubled Victor and often did him some good. There were plenty of women who wanted a man who they knew could please them properly.

“Oh, I see. Is that where you’ve been all this time?”

“Some of it,” Victor said. “I visited with a judge friend of mine, then went and saw my sister. It was a pleasant visit for the most part.”

“Does your sister live in London as well?” Bradley picked up the wastebasket near the side of the desk and started clearing envelopes and wadded-up papers from Victor’s desk. It seemed like everything that had come across the desk since he’d gotten back was garbage and he was grateful to Bradley for taking care of it. Perhaps he would make a good assistant out of him yet.

“She lives just outside London in---“

“Mr. Pembroke!” The secretary rushed in, interrupting him. Victor turned to her with a frown. “I’m sorry sir but there’s a woman here to

see you and I told her she'd have to make an appointment but she started coming back on her own." Before Victor could do so much as ask the woman's name, Cordelia Whittemore pushed open his office door and glared at him.

"You!"

"It's fine, Miss Wright," Victor said, waving her away. "I'll see Lady Whittemore." He turned to Bradley. "Could you help Miss Wright clear my schedule of appointments this morning? This matter needs immediate attention."

"Of course, sir," both Miss Wright and Bradley said at the same time. They looked at one another then left the office together, Bradley going with a knowing smirk. When the door was closed, Victor started to get up from behind the desk.

"Lady Whittemore, what an honor it is to have you come to visit me. I quite honestly intended to come speak to you at your estate but I only just got in last night."

"Oh, will you men never tire of hearing your own voices?" She pressed a hand to her forehead. "I know about my father-in-law's will and I know you've been keeping Arthur's secret for him as well. What sort of lawyer would let such a ridiculous condition be set in a will?" Her voice was getting louder with each word and Victor came around the desk, hoping to soothe her.

"You have every right to be angry," Victor said. "I know in your place I probably would be."

"You have no idea what you'd do in my place," Cordelia shouted. "You've never even been remotely close to being in my place! Because of you I'm trapped in this, this *joke* of a marriage until you can find a way to get me out of it that doesn't leave me begging for coins on the street!"

"I know you're upset, but may I please get a word in edgewise?" He raised an eyebrow at Cordelia and she continued to look daggers at him but was silent. "First things first, I had nothing to do with this will. My former partner, the owner of this firm, wrote that will with the late Lord Whittemore before I even came to Greenley. I had no part in it, and no knowledge of the thing until Arthur brought it up to me. As it stands, the will is legally binding but I'm working with a friend of mine who is a judge to try and have the condition dismissed as the ravings of a dying man. As my former partner is deceased himself, I have no qualms against telling a judge that he allowed Lord Whittemore to set the condition without considering the legal ramifications of it." He looked at Cordelia. "Am I being too technical for you?"

"But then you know about Arthur," Cordelia said, completely ignoring his jab at her. "You know why he's trying to divorce me."

"I know he *wants* to divorce you," Victor said. "He's never said why. I've heard rumors, though. That was why I've been trying to talk to you alone. I wanted to know if there was any truth to the rumor and I wanted to ask you directly. But discreetly, just in case you didn't know." He looked at her closely. Around the edges of Cordelia's anger he could see something more. Dread, perhaps, or fear. "You do know, then."

"What exactly is it that you think you know?" Cordelia was suddenly cautious and Victor went around her to lock the door, not wanting anyone to come in and hear them talking, even by accident. "What are you doing?"

"I said our conversation was to be private but you never know what sort of woman might come barging in shouting at me about legal matters." It was a weak attempt to make her smile but the very corners of Cordelia's mouth twitched anyway and she forced them down into a frown again. "Now then, let's clear the air. I'll tell you what it is I've heard and you can confirm or deny it as you see fit. Keep in mind that if I'm to help you I'll need the truth in the end, though."

"All right," Cordelia said. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, and for a moment Victor was struck by the almost lacy look of her lashes against her lower lids. When she opened them again, the chocolate brown color was warm enough to drown in. "Tell me."

"I'm sure it's no secret to anyone that I frequent the pub here in town," he said. "As well as the pub in the neighboring city and Elston, where your sister Bridget and the General live."

"Yes," Cordelia said, rolling her eyes. "My sister has told me about your leisure activities. It's none of my concern what you do in your free time."

"I don't just hang about in pubs for the beer, if that's what you're thinking," Victor said, annoyed that he had to prove his innocence to yet another person. "They're a great source of information and people let quite a lot slip when they're drunk."

"I'm aware," she said, frost coating her words. "Please continue."

"I heard from a gentleman here in town that Arthur has been seen in the company of young men," Victor said. "Several different young men, I'm afraid. He brings them to drink and they leave together, and no one is sure where they go exactly but there have been plenty of inferences."

"I'm sure there have. And I'm fairly certain I know where they go," she said, though now the cold tone of her voice was directed at the man who was not in the room instead of the man who stood before her. It was a relief, in a way. He hadn't been alone with Cordelia since she ordered him out of her house and for her to be mad at someone

else was a welcome change. "I'm telling you this in confidence, Mr. Pembroke. I don't wish to hear it spread around town."

"I'm a lawyer," he said. "If there's one thing I'm good at, it's keeping secrets." He made a schoolyard 'cross my heart' gesture over his chest and relief washed over him as Cordelia burst out laughing. She immediately slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "That was completely inappropriate of me. I don't know what came over me, I honestly don't."

"You're under a fair amount of stress," Victor said, smiling at her. "We sometimes do strange things under stress. Please feel free to speak your mind in front of me. Rest assured I won't tell anyone outside this room."

"I walked in on him today," Cordelia said, lowering her voice so that he had to come a little closer to her. "With another man. He brought him into our house and was with him in his bedroom." She looked away a little. "A very young man. He wasn't completely dressed."

"Ah," Victor said. "I see."

"It's not the first time," she went on, and now her words were coming out in a rush. "When we first got married we had some, well, *problems* and I assumed it was my fault, but then I moved into the manor and things seemed better. I didn't even think twice when he said we should have separate rooms, everyone in my family does, but when I went to see if he needed anything I walked in on him and another man again." Her face was beet red as she spoke this time. "The young man was on his knees and--"

"Enough," Victor said, holding up a hand. "I'm fairly certain I can guess what was going on. And while I have no moral objection to what your husband has been doing so long as it doesn't harm anyone, it is certainly harming you. You are perfectly within your rights to ask for a divorce and even without representation I'm certain a judge would grant it to you."

"I feel there's another shoe about to drop, sir."

"I'm afraid so. As you said, if he divorces you he loses the entire estate. The money will go to a charity of his choosing and Arthur's title will be rescinded. He'd be lucky not to end in a poorhouse, especially since he has no skills to speak of. And while I'm almost certain what becomes of your philandering husband is of no great concern to you, you must consider what will become of you." The smile had disappeared from Cordelia's face and she sighed deeply.

"Yes, I know that much. Arthur mentioned it himself. As selfish as it sounds, I don't wish to go back and live with my parents. I love them dearly but I just have this nagging feeling that they'll find a way to blame this on me."

“Parents can be difficult,” Victor agreed. “It’s almost criminal the way society treats women in your situation. There’s nothing you’ve done wrong, my dear, and even if it means abandoning Arthur’s cause in favor of yours I’ll fight anyone who says you have.”

“You said you’re working on it, though,” Cordelia said, and he didn’t think he was imagining the blush that was on her cheeks. “Trying to find a way around the condition. If you could, does that mean he’d have the means to take care of me after the divorce?”

“That’s absolutely true,” Victor said. “The judge friend that I just met with is asking a friend of his who sits on the High Court. It might require assistance from the late Lord Whittemore’s physician though. He would need to testify to the man’s mental state, give evidence that he wasn’t in his right mind, that sort of thing. Unfortunately, testimony like that can be very hard to come by. It might require a bit of persuasion.”

“Persuasion?”

“Of the monetary sort. Arthur has given me reason to believe that he wouldn’t have a problem with that, Lord knows he has enough money. As much as it pains me to say it, your best course of action right now would be to stay with him until I can get this figured out.” Victor shook his head. “I’m sorry I don’t have better answers for you. Does any of your staff suspect?”

“They probably do,” Cordelia said. “I know for a fact that Patricia knows, she walked in on them. She told me in confidence but I already knew.” Her jaw tightened in a very unladylike manner and he wondered if she knew she was doing it. “You and she can probably talk all about it next time you’re at the estate.”

“That was a mistake,” Victor said. “I was very drunk and she looked very pretty. I assure you nothing will happen again.” He gave her a rakish smile. “I generally confine my affairs to ladies of a higher station.”

“Patricia is a lovely girl,” Cordelia said abruptly. “In fact, I’m making her my lady’s maid. How dare you say that about her?”

“I meant nothing unkind,” Victor said, holding up his hands in surrender. “It’s just that I try to get to know ladies who are single and a bit older. I don’t often seduce the serving staff. I apologize for my rudeness, Lady Whittemore. As I said, it won’t happen again.”

“I should hope not.” She sighed. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Pembroke. I don’t believe I’ve solved anything but you’ve given me hope.” She opened her pocketbook. “I suppose I should pay you for your time. You lawyers get an hourly wage, right?”

“Put that away,” Victor said, reaching out to cover her hand with his own. “Arthur already pays me enough and I’m not going to take money from a woman who came to me for advice.” He realized she

wasn't wearing gloves, which meant she had probably left her house in a hurry. Her hand was warm and soft and he closed his fingers around it. Cordelia looked up at him in surprise but didn't pull away. "Are you going home right away?"

"I don't know," Cordelia said. "Most likely. I'm sure I look a fright."

"Don't be ridiculous. You look just fine." He took in the shape of her face, the few strands of hair that had escaped her chignon, then the mud on the hem of her dress. "Perhaps you could use a bit of cleanup but on the whole you're quite lovely."

"Hmph." She looked like she wasn't convinced, but now he was certain she was blushing. Taking the chance of a lifetime, he reached out to her and touched her face.

"There's nothing quite so beautiful as a woman with color on her cheeks." Victor lightly stroked her cheek and she leaned into his touch. He wondered how long it had been since anyone had touched her like this. Surely Arthur hadn't been doing it much, if at all. The only affection he'd seen the man display toward his wife was a chaste kiss on the cheek.

"This is most improper," she said, though she didn't pull away. Victor smiled down at her and moved closer until he could feel the warmth coming off her body.

"Oh yes?"

"Most definitely."

"Then this is going to absolutely scandalize you." Victor leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. Cordelia's eyes widened in surprise but once again she didn't pull away from him. He kissed her gently at first, and when she responded he pulled her into his arms and let his lips become more passionate. Cordelia leaned her head back as he brushed his lips along the side of her neck and her unpinned hat tumbled off the back of her head.

"Oh!" She turned to look at the hat, which was somewhat squashed on top. Victor was almost certain the fall from her head hadn't done that, but he let go of her and leaned down to pick it up. "I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me!"

"I know what it was," Victor said. He dusted the hat off and set it lightly on her head. "It was the same thing that came over me, only this time I wasn't able to control myself. I've wanted to kiss you since the moment I met you, Lady Whittemore."

"I should go," she said, taking a step back. "I should really go. Before I do something foolish." Before Victor could ask what she meant by 'foolish,' she turned and went to the door. She turned the knob and found it locked, and Victor came up behind her.

"Here," he said, moving closely enough so that his body was

lightly touching hers, then reached around her to unlock it. He managed to suppress the urge to put his arms around her, and stepped away quickly when Cordelia opened the door. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin her reputation, especially if she was going to be getting a divorce. Victor didn't care what people said about him, but he didn't want them to talk badly about Cordelia.

"Thank you for your time," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I'll try to be patient." He didn't get a chance to respond before she hurried down the hall, and Victor watched her until she disappeared around the corner before going into his office and closing the door.

In spite of the situation, he found himself grinning as he sat behind his desk. It was perfect timing, as Bradley came in almost immediately and he didn't want the boy to see what state he was in. After being so close to Cordelia that his body was on hers for a moment and extremely improper thoughts were going through his head, he was more than a little aroused.

"Is everything all right with Lady Whittemore? She looked awfully upset when she came in." There was a letter in his hand and he passed it across the table to Victor.

"She's better now," Victor said, picking up the letter opener. "I gave her some legal advice and she has an idea of how to handle things. It's why I became a lawyer, Bradley. To help beautiful women in their time of need."

"I'll have to get some pointers from you about women, sir. You seem to know what to do to please them." He smiled. "Would you like something to drink? Tea, perhaps?"

"Yes, that would be nice, thank you." Bradley nodded and left the office, and Victor stared at the letter without reading it. His thoughts were still on Cordelia and he considered what Bradley had said. It had never been said that he didn't know how to please a woman, but perhaps there was something he could do for her that didn't involve slowly stripping off her clothes and kissing every inch of her body.

This is not the way to calm down, he admonished himself, and attempted to pay more attention to the letter. A moment later his thoughts were back on Cordelia and he tossed the letter on his desk. He'd never had this much trouble getting a woman off his mind before. With a sigh, he leaned back in his chair and waited for Bradley to return. No doubt talking to the boy would get his mind off things. *What to do about Lady Whittemore, though?*

Chapter 8

Even two days later, Cordelia couldn't get the kiss out of her head. She lifted her hair so Patricia could button her dress, and the brush of a few strands over the side of her neck reminded her of Victor's lips. She could feel the blush creeping up her neck and to her face and fanned herself in an attempt to make it go away.

"Are you hot, ma'am? I could open a window."

"A bit," Cordelia said. "For future reference, Patricia, you really should do my hair before helping me dress."

"I'm sorry, ma'am!"

"It's all right, dear, you're new at this." It was true. The young woman who had been her lady's maid had been called away suddenly after her mother died, leaving Patricia to do the job alone with little training. She seemed terrified of Mrs. Richmond, who had made it clear that she was a lady's assistant and *not* a maid, so Cordelia had taken it on herself to guide the girl. "You'll learn soon enough. Don't be afraid to ask questions, either. I'll do my best to answer them."

"Thank you," Patricia said, looking relieved as she went to the window and opened it. A cool breeze came through and it did make her feel a bit better. "Shall I do your hair now?"

"That would be nice, thank you." Cordelia sat at her dressing table. She could hardly blame the girl for the error. If she hadn't been so busy thinking about Victor, she could have told her ahead of time. Patricia came over and picked up the brush.

"You have such beautiful hair. It's so long," Patricia said. "My hair doesn't want to grow and it seems I've tried everything."

"I've got a good hair tonic I take daily," Cordelia said absently. "They don't have it in Greenley so I have to have it delivered in from London."

"That must be expensive," Patricia said. "I doubt I would be able to afford it."

"I'll give you some to try," Cordelia said. "Arthur orders it by the case." She stifled a sigh. She supposed Victor was right. If she wanted to have anything like her current life she was going to have to keep up

the charade a little longer. Neither she nor Arthur had spoken to one another since her blowup and she couldn't say she was upset about it. They sat silently across the table from one another at mealtimes, her angry and him awkward, and she retired to her room or the conservatory immediately.

"That's very kind of you, ma'am." She began to brush Cordelia's hair and it felt exquisite. Cordelia had always loved having someone brush her hair. When she and Birdie were small, she used to brush her sister's hair but Birdie never seemed to like it as much as she did. "I've never really done someone else's hair, only my own, so I apologize if it's not very good."

"You'll learn," Cordelia said again. "Just do your best." Patricia continued to brush her hair and nodded at her mistress in the mirror. She seemed to be taking a while and Cordelia assumed it was because she was trying to put off doing her hair, but she didn't say anything. The brushing felt good and she was able to relax a little.

She couldn't believe Victor had kissed her, especially not in his office. He'd locked the door but she didn't get the feeling he'd done it so he could kiss her, more because he wanted to protect her secret. The kiss had just happened, she doubted he'd planned it. Still, it felt good to be wanted and to be kissed with feeling instead of obligation, and when he'd moved down to her neck she'd wanted to melt into him. Not even on her wedding night had Cordelia felt such desire in a kiss and it had ignited something in her. She wanted to see Victor again in private, to see if his lips felt as good a second time and maybe feel his hands on her body. A pleasant shiver went through her when she remembered how close he'd been to her when he unlocked the door and Patricia stopped.

"Are you chilled, ma'am? I could close the window."

"No, I'm all right," Cordelia replied. "A goose just walked over my grave, I suppose." She watched Patricia in the mirror to see if she suspected anything, but the girl only set the brush aside and picked up a few hair pins. If this was how he had kissed her, she could hardly blame Patricia for letting it happen. She smiled as she watched Patricia frown and delicately twist her hair into a careful bun. It was very loose but serviceable and she smiled brightly. "That's lovely, thank you."

"Really? I'm afraid it will fall down," Patricia said uncertainly.

"Then I'll have you try again. I really believe it will stay in place, though. It's not as if I'll be doing anything strenuous." She leaned forward and opened her jewelry box. Her wedding band was in it, along with her grandmother's necklace. Cordelia left her ring where it was and took out the necklace.

"My, that's pretty!" Patricia's eyes widened. "Are those sapphires?"

"I think they're blue topaz," Cordelia said. "It needs some care, though. I wonder if there's a place in Greenley I can take it to, or if I need to go to Elston. I know my sister's wedding set came from a jeweler there."

"There's actually a watchmaker in town that does some jewelry repair as well," Patricia said. "I don't know that he would be able to craft something this beautiful but he could certainly clean it up and repair the clasp." She smiled. "It looks like an antique."

"It belonged to my grandmother. She used to let me wear it when I was younger." Cordelia handed it to her. "My sister found it in a trunk where we kept our dress-up clothes. That's probably how it got in there in the first place."

"It's very---"

"Cordelia Whittimore!" Mrs. Richmond's voice made Cordelia cringe, as it had since she was a child. Privately, she sometimes wondered when the old woman would die. She was quite old. She'd been old when Cordelia was a child. "I've just been made aware of the state of your dress from yesterday and I am appalled!" She spied the necklace in Patricia's hand and turned her attention to the girl. "And what exactly are you doing with that?"

"She was about to put it on me," Cordelia said as calmly as possible. "Weren't you, dear?"

"O-oh yes," Patricia said. She seemed to understand what Cordelia wanted and draped it around her neck, then pretended to notice the broken clasp. "Oh dear, it seems to be broken."

"That's a shame," Cordelia said, taking the necklace from her and examining it. "I shall just have to take it to town to be repaired, that's all."

"Not if you're going to treat your clothes as poorly as you did yesterday. Mud all over your dress! Your hat crushed on top! I've come to expect such behavior from Bridget but you've never been so careless with your things!" Her lecture was nothing new and Cordelia did her best to look ashamed of herself while her mind wandered.

If she took the necklace to town herself, there was a chance she would get to see Victor again. She could go to his office and pretend to need his advice, and maybe he would kiss her again. The thought made her blush, something that didn't escape Mrs. Richmond's notice.

"Are you even listening to me, Cordelia?"

"Yes ma'am. I'll take more care this time. I really should be the one to take the necklace, though. I can explain what needs to be done to it." She smiled at Mrs. Richmond, then turned to Patricia. "Could you bring out my black and tan boots and my light green dress?"

"Right away, ma'am." Obviously glad to be out of Mrs. Richmond's sight, Patricia hurried into the closet to locate the dress and boots

while Cordelia turned and picked up a hand mirror so she could look at the back of her head.

"Eleanor was far better at doing your hair," Mrs. Richmond sniffed. "This looks like it will fall down if a breeze blows over it."

"It will be under my hat when I'm in town," Cordelia said. "And when I'm back home she can always put it back up. There's no other way for her to learn. For being on her own two days into being trained, she's doing quite well."

"If you say so."

"This dress, ma'am?" Patricia came out of the closet with a sage green dress whose top looked a bit like a man's suit. It was meant to have a high-necked shirtwaist underneath but there was no way for the girl to know that.

"That's perfect, Patricia. Just lay it out on the bed and you can help me change into it in a moment." Patricia did as she asked, then went back to get the boots. Cordelia looked back at Mrs. Richmond. "There, something more appropriate for a trip into town, would you say?"

"It's not up to me to dress you," the old woman said. "You and your sister hardly ever listen to me anyhow." She turned and left the room, and when Patricia returned with the boots and saw that Mrs. Richmond was gone, she visibly relaxed.

"There's a shirtwaist in the closet that goes with this dress," Cordelia said. "It's got a high neck with lace on the collar. If you could fetch that as well it would be perfect."

"Of course." She went back into the closet and Cordelia smiled into the mirror. If she was going to possibly see Victor, she wanted to look her best and her green dress was a favorite. Were she a little bolder, she would have worn it without the shirtwaist but she didn't want him to think she was inviting anything. Patricia returned with the shirtwaist and Cordelia stood up.

She was quiet while Patricia unbuttoned the dress she was wearing and helped her step out of it, then took off her shirtwaist to change into the new one. The green dress buttoned in the front so she really didn't need Patricia's help to put it on but she had a hard time getting the buttons on her boots done up alone so she sat at the dressing table while Patricia did it for her.

"You look lovely, ma'am. Shall I fetch you a hat?"

"There's a green one that matches this in the closet," Cordelia said. "It has pink roses around the brim." Patricia nodded and went back into the closet a third time while Cordelia selected a hatpin, remembering how her hat had fallen off the day before. It brought back memories of Victor's office and she smiled. Yes, she wanted to see him again.

Once she was dressed, she sent Patricia down to get the carriage and driver while she searched for a small box to put her grandmother's necklace in. She found a velvet one that contained a string of pearls that had been given to her as a wedding gift and took out the pearls, then dropped them into the jewelry box. She tucked the box into her pocketbook and went to the front door where the driver was waiting for her.

"Ready when you are, ma'am."

"Thank you." She turned to Patricia. "Please tidy up my clothes while I'm out. See if you can get the dirt out of the dress I wore the other day. If you have trouble, please ask for help. But you don't have to dust my room or arrange my sheets. Leave that to the housemaid."

"Yes, ma'am." Patricia went back upstairs while the driver opened the front door.

"Have you already said goodbye to Lord Whittemore?" His words made Cordelia's jaw clench and she shook her head.

"He's busy. I don't wish to disturb him." She went down the stairs and got into the carriage with the driver's help, then settled into her seat as he climbed aboard.

The ride to town was short and her driver helped her out of the carriage in front of the watchmaker's shop. She went inside and found herself surrounded by clocks of all sorts. They were all ticking at once and while it was a little unsettling at first she supposed she could see how it would be comforting after a while.

"Lady Whittemore," a voice said from the door, and Cordelia jumped a little. She hadn't even heard the door open. When she turned and saw Victor standing there with a clock in his hands, her face turned red immediately. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"My lady's maid told me this gentleman could repair some jewelry for me," she said, her eyes moving over his face. "What are you doing here?"

"My clock fell off the wall of my office and one of the hands broke off." He held up the clock. "I was cursing the thing but now I'm glad it fell when it did. Otherwise I might not have gotten to see you." He came toward her and her heart sped up. Surely he wouldn't kiss her right there where the watchmaker could walk in and see them. He was coming closer, though, and Cordelia's breath caught in her throat. "I've been wanting to see you." Before Cordelia could reply, a small round man came out from behind a curtain over a door that led to a back room.

"Oh, good afternoon," he said. "So sorry to make you wait, I didn't know anyone was out here. I really should put that bell back on the door." He looked at Victor's clock and nodded. "I can see what the trouble is there, Mr. Pembroke. Let me take that off your hands so you

don't have to carry it around." He went to Victor and relieved him of his clock, which he set on a table behind the counter, then turned to Cordelia. "I don't believe we've met, young lady. How may I assist you?"

"I'm Lady Cordelia Whittemore," she said with a smile. "I was told you could repair a piece of jewelry for me?"

"Absolutely," the watchmaker said. "For politeness' sake, I'm Jefferson Russell. It's good to meet you, Lady Whittemore. What type of jewelry is it?"

"It's a necklace," Cordelia said, opening her pocketbook to take out the box. "It belonged to my grandmother. My sister found it a few days ago and the clasp is broken." She opened the box and showed him the necklace. "It's also a bit dirty."

"That's gorgeous," Victor commented, looking over her shoulder. "It's probably worth a good deal if those are real stones."

"I can clean it up and fix that clasp for you easily," Mr. Russell said. "I also see a couple of loose prongs on one of the stones and that flower on the end is drooping. I can fix those as well." He looked up at her. "When were you looking to have this back?"

"Take your time," Cordelia said. "I don't have any plans to wear it anytime soon. I just want it cleaned and fixed properly. It means a lot to me as my grandmother is no longer with us."

"Of course, madam. Shall we say a week? I can bring it to your estate if it's too much trouble for you to come down here." He closed the box and took it from Cordelia. "I'll write you up a receipt. You can rest assured that it will be safe here with me."

"Thank you, Mr. Russell. It won't be necessary for you to bring it to the estate, I'll be happy to come get it myself. It's nice to get out for a while." She turned to Victor as Mr. Russell searched for his receipt book. "Any news?"

"Not yet. I'm waiting for a letter from my friend." He sighed. "It would be so much easier if there was a telephone in this damn town."

"Here you are, Lady Whittemore," Mr. Russell said, handing her a slip of paper. "I'll have it ready for you next Thursday." Cordelia took the receipt from him and tucked it into her pocketbook. She started to take out her wallet and he put up a hand. "There's no need for that right away. You can pay me when the job's done."

"Thank you," Cordelia said, closing her pocketbook. "I certainly do appreciate that." She looked at Victor, wishing that the watchmaker would go back into the back room and leave them alone together. She wasn't sure how much good it would do but she couldn't very well tell him he'd been on her mind with someone else in the room. "I look forward to hearing from you soon, Mr. Pembroke."

"Where are you off to next?" Victor opened the door for her and

she looked down the street. It wasn't often she came to town so she wasn't exactly sure what was there apart from a bookstore, the watchmaker, and Victor's office. Mrs. Richmond always told her that going into town was the job of the servants, so she had most things delivered to her.

"I was going back home, I suppose. Unless you have something more interesting to show me." The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she realized how they sounded and she blushed as Victor raised an eyebrow at her. "I meant any stores I should know about!"

"There's a music store but I doubt there's anything in there that would be worth your time. Though there is a gentleman there who teaches composition. You might want to speak to him and see what he has to say." They stepped out onto the sidewalk and Cordelia waved at her driver, who was about to get off the carriage.

"I'm going to the music store," she said. "You can wait for me here or meet me down there, whichever is easier for you." The driver nodded and relaxed on the seat, and Cordelia turned to Victor. "All right, show me this music store."

“C

omposition all comes from the mathematics,” the young

man who had introduced himself as Maurice DuVerne said. He was French but his accent wasn't overwhelming and his English was excellent, which meant Cordelia wasn't distracted by trying to figure out what he was saying. “I'm certain they educated you in the mathematics in school.”

“Oh yes,” Cordelia said. “I was actually quite good at arithmetic.”

“That will help you a great deal.” He drew an oval on one of the blank bars on the sheets he'd brought with him. “You already know the whole note, yes? Also the quarter and eighth notes?” Cordelia nodded and he smiled. “Good, very good. I shall teach you the other notes such as the sixteenth and thirty-second and how to translate the music in your mind onto the paper.”

“This is very interesting,” Cordelia said. “I will admit to having melodies in my head that I've made up sometimes but how can you teach me how to write them down?”

“You shall sing them for me and I shall show you how to write them,” Maurice said grandly. “Soon you will not even need my help. Will you play for me? I would like to hear the level of music you are on at the moment.”

“Of course,” Cordelia said, standing up from the table they had been sitting at in the conservatory. “Not to be rude but how much will your services cost? I'm sure we can pay for it but I'd like to know so I can inform my husband.”

“Do not even concern yourself with that,” Maurice said as she led him to the piano. “Monsieur Pembroke has already assured me he will be covering my full fee.”

“He *what*?” Cordelia's eyes widened. “He most certainly will not! We shall pay you properly ourselves. My goodness.” She turned away from Maurice, not knowing how long she could keep herself from grinning. Victor wanted to pay for her composition lessons. She couldn't believe he would make such an offer.

“It is too late, madame. He has already paid me in advance.”

Cordelia stared at him with her mouth open and Maurice shrugged. "He said he enjoys the music you play a great deal and wanted to make sure you learned as much as possible." He smiled. "You have what we call en Francais a *patron*."

"I never asked him to do that," Cordelia said, putting her fingers on the keys. Inside she was jumping for joy. Even with everything else he was doing for her, Victor had paid for her lessons and it made her ecstatic. She wished she could go down to his office at that moment and hug him. "Do you care what I play?"

"Whatever you wish, madame."

Without so much as a glance at the sheet music, Cordelia played one of her favorite pieces for Maurice, a quick and upbeat piece that made him nod his head as he listened. She saw the music in her head as she played and the familiar feeling of freedom came over her. It felt good to play and even better to know how much Victor cared for her.

"Very nice, madame, very nice. Have you ever played a piece for four hands?" Maurice smiled at her and she shook her head.

"You mean two people playing at the same time? Goodness, no. I didn't even know such a thing was possible." She was already learning so much from this young man, she could hardly believe it. It seemed there was more to music than just playing alone in the conservatory and she wanted to know more and more.

"I brought some music with me," he said, going to the bag he had brought along. "Would you like to try a piece with me?" He took out a book of sheet music and Cordelia nodded eagerly.

"Oh absolutely! It sounds like it would be quite fun."

"It certainly is." Maurice brought the book over and opened it on the music stand. The music looked more complex than anything she'd played before and he pointed to one set of notes. "This is the section you play. This is the section I will play. The hardest part of playing the piece like this is focusing on your own set of notes. Are you ready?"

"I suppose I am," Cordelia said uncertainly. Maurice gave her an encouraging smile.

"You will do fine. I will count us off. *Un, deux, trois, quatre*, go!" He began playing at the same time she did and Cordelia's eyes moved over the music. It was easy enough to follow her half but some of it caused her to reach over and around Maurice and she bumped elbows with him a few times. It wasn't frustrating, though, it was fun and she found herself laughing as she played. Maurice was laughing a fair amount as well and there were more than a few mistakes and missed notes but she was having a good time.

"Excuse me," a voice at the conservatory door said, and Cordelia stopped playing and turned to see Mrs. Richmond standing in the

doorway. She had her usual disapproving look on her face and for the first time Cordelia wondered if there was any other look she was capable of. She wasn't doing anything that could be construed as improper, yet there the old woman was. "There's a delivery for you."

"A delivery?" Cordelia stood up and looked curiously at Mrs. Richmond. "I'm not expecting anything at the moment, perhaps it's for Arthur."

"It's a gentleman who asked for you specifically," Mrs. Richmond said. "He says he has your grandmother's necklace."

"Ah! Yes, that must be Mr. Russell." She turned to Maurice. "Thank you for the lesson, Monsieur. Shall we meet again at the same time next week?"

"*Oui*, that would be best. I shall leave some blank paper for you. Try copying down some of your favorite music so that you will learn how to write notes properly. The treble clef gives many people trouble." Maurice collected his satchel and put it over his arm.

"Oh, don't forget your music!" Cordelia picked up the sheet music he'd set on the piano and he shook his head.

"Please keep it," he said. "Study your part and we shall try playing again at our next lesson. I would like you to learn to play this way so you will know how to write it as well."

"Let me walk you to the door," Cordelia said, motioning to the conservatory door. Mrs. Richmond walked behind them, keeping an eye on Cordelia as firmly as if she was a teenager again. She'd always thought of it as just a fact of life but for some reason it was starting to get on her nerves. She wasn't a schoolgirl to be minded anymore, she was a woman, grown and married.

At the front door, Mr. Russell was standing just inside the hallway with a box in his hands. When he saw Cordelia approaching, he smiled. Cordelia nodded to him, then opened the door for Maurice.

"Thank you again, Monsieur. I shall see you next Wednesday." Once he was gone, she turned to Mr. Russell. "I wasn't expecting to see you today, sir. I thought we had agreed on tomorrow." She couldn't help being a little disappointed. She hadn't been into town since she'd dropped off the watch, so she hadn't had a chance to see Victor either.

"I finished this morning and couldn't wait for you to see it," Mr. Russell said, handing her the box. "Besides, I needed to take a walk. If I don't give these old legs a good stretch once in a while they start to ache."

"You walked all the way out here? My goodness, please come sit down!" Cordelia led him into the sitting room and motioned to a chair. She looked at Mrs. Richardson. "Could you please have the maid bring him in something to drink?" Cordelia looked at her guest.

“Would you care for some ginger beer? Our cook makes American-style lemonade as well, it’s quite refreshing.”

“American-style, you say? I don’t believe I’ve ever had that. Yes, I’ll try a glass.” As soon as Mrs. Richmond was gone he handed her the box. “Here you go, my dear. It turned out to be much more beautiful than I expected under that tarnish. Silver will do that, though.”

“It is a troublesome metal.” Cordelia opened the box and inhaled sharply. “Oh my, it’s beautiful, Mr. Russell. It looks just as I remember it from when I was a little girl.” She picked up the necklace, which now sparkled in the light. “Thank you so much.”

“It was no trouble at all,” he said. One of the serving maids came through the door of the sitting room with a tray, on which a single glass of lemonade sat. “Thank you,” Mr. Russell said, taking the glass. “I didn’t expect there to be quite so much lemon in it.” He took a sip, then smiled broadly. “Wonderful. It was certainly worth the trip out here.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Cordelia carefully put the necklace back in its box and got up from her chair. “If you’ll just wait here, I’ll get a cheque from my husband for you.”

“There’s no rush,” Mr. Russell said, shaking his head and taking another drink of his lemonade. “We can settle the account at the end of the month. I would like to see your gardens a bit more, though. My wife is trying to grow roses and they’re just not doing well.”

“Certainly,” Cordelia said. “I don’t see how our roses are going to help hers, but I’m glad to take you through the garden.”

“To be quite frank, I’d like to be able to tell her that it’s not the soil or the water she’s using, the problem is with her. She’s determined to start big and I think she just doesn’t have the skill for it yet.” Mr. Russell stood up and held up his glass. “Do you mind if I bring this along?”

“Not at all,” Cordelia replied. “I often like to have something cool to drink in the garden. Let’s go out the front door, there are some lovely pink roses right off the front walk.” She led the watchmaker to the door and he nodded.

“Yes, that’s what made me think to ask.”

“I’m glad you did.” Cordelia pulled the door open and found herself face to face with a deliveryman who had his hand raised to ring the bell. “Oh,” she said, surprised. “Hello! You must be here for my husband. If you step inside, someone will be with you in just a moment.”

“Actually, this package is for Lady Whittemore.” The deliveryman looked at her. “I take it that’s you, then?”

“It is,” she said, looking at the brown-wrapped package. “I didn’t order anything, though.”

“Perhaps it’s a present,” the deliveryman said impatiently. “Could you just take it, ma’am? I’ve got other packages to deliver.” Cordelia nodded and he thrust it into her arms. “There you are. Have a good day, ma’am.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Cordelia sighed and turned to Mr. Russell. “Do you mind waiting just a moment?” He shook his head and she smiled. “Thank you.”

She carried the package into the house, hoping to run into one of the staff, and by chance Patricia was the one coming down the stairs. Her eyes widened when she saw Cordelia carrying the package and she hurried down to take it from her.

“Thank you, Patricia. Could you take this to my room for me? Just set it on the bed and I’ll open it when I get a moment.” The girl nodded and went back up the stairs with the package. It was slightly oversized and a little awkward to carry, and Cordelia was glad she wasn’t the one who had to deal with it. Cordelia tried for a moment to guess what might be in it from the way it looked in Patricia’s arms, but remembered her guest and hurried back out to the garden. “Thank you for waiting,” she said. “Come on around the house with me, I’ll show you my favorite roses.”

A good hour later, Cordelia bid farewell to Mr. Russell and invited him to come back with his wife for dinner sometime. She had offered to arrange him a ride back to town but he had insisted on walking and she waited until he was at the end of the drive to go back inside.

“What a kind man,” Cordelia said to Mrs. Richmond as she closed the door. “I wish everyone could be so nice.” They went into the sitting room and she picked up the box with the necklace in it. Mrs. Richmond scowled at her.

“I can’t believe you just left that down here where anyone could come take it.”

“No one is going to take it,” Cordelia said, irritated. “Apart from Arthur, there’s only me and the staff here and I hardly think any of them would be interested in something like this.” She opened the box and looked down at the necklace. “It’s very pretty but I don’t think it’s particularly valuable.”

“Even so---”

“I’m going up to my room,” Cordelia interrupted, before Mrs. Richmond could really get started on her lecture. “My lesson and walking around the garden have tired me out and I’d like to lie down before dinner.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Richmond said. “If anyone else comes to the door for you, I shall tell them you’re not to be disturbed.”

“Please do.” Glad to be freed of Mrs. Richmond’s suffocating stare, Cordelia hurried up the stairs and went into her bedroom. She put the

box with the necklace in it on her dressing table, then sat down to take off her boots. They were far easier to get off than put on and she had them off in moments, wiggling her toes with relief.

When she went to lie down, however, the box that had been delivered earlier was on her bed and she looked at it curiously. Now that she was able to see it clearly, it looked like a dress box. She picked up a nail file and cut the string, then tore off the brown paper to reveal a pinkish box with the words "Ellery Of London" printed in gold on the front. Frowning, Cordelia opened the box and took out a layer of tissue paper, then gasped.

Lying inside on a bed of tissue was the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen. When she picked it up, it only got more wonderful. It had a skirt in shades of light blue and green that reminded her of ocean waves, a cream-colored top with puffed sleeves and gold accents, and what looked like a jumper made of thousands of blue and gold beads that dripped from the square neckline to where her knees would be. Matching embroidery and beads decorated the hem of the skirt and Cordelia put her hand over her mouth.

"My Lord," she breathed. "Who would send me something like this?" She laid the dress on the bed, then looked through the box for a card. She didn't see one, so she picked up the tissue paper she had taken off the top and found a small envelope tucked in it. It was sealed and Cordelia pulled it open, eager to see who had sent her such an extravagant gift.

My dearest Cordelia, the card read. I hope it fits, I had to guess the size. Think of me when you wear it, and imagine I'm as close as the fabric against your skin. There was no name on it but Cordelia knew immediately who had sent it. Her cheeks were on fire as she read the card again, her eyes taking in every angle and curve of Victor's handwriting, and she hastily tucked the card back into its envelope and stuck it at the bottom of her jewelry box. Her husband might be having affairs with all the young men in Greenley but a part of her still wasn't prepared for anyone to find out she'd kissed another man in secret.

"Lady Whittemore?" There was a light knock on her door and Cordelia recognized Patricia's voice. She closed the jewelry box and fanned her face as she turned around.

"Come in, Patricia." The door opened and Patricia came in with an armload of roses.

"Mrs. Richmond said you were going to lie down. May I help you get undressed?" She took the roses to a large vase that was sitting on Cordelia's dresser and put them inside it. "I'll bring you some water for them in a moment. They're from Lord Whittemore."

"Please inform my husband that they're lovely but he needn't have

bothered,” Cordelia said icily. “I can’t believe he’d think something like this would make up for what he’s done.” It was a relief for someone else to know about Arthur’s affairs, especially someone she could talk to privately. “And I don’t need any help undressing, I’m not really lying down. I just wanted to be alone.”

“I understand,” Patricia said. “I’ll bring in some water for your flowers, then leave you alone.” She smiled. “I’ll be sure to tell everyone you’re sleeping.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you need me to take away this box on your bed? Oh my!” The dress had caught Patricia’s eye and Cordelia joined her beside the bed. “This is gorgeous, ma’am! Wherever did you get it?” She reached out as if to touch it, then pulled her hand away. “I’m sorry, it’s just so lovely.”

“It was a gift,” Cordelia said. “You may pick it up if you like. It will need to be hung up anyway.” Patricia nodded and held the dress up to see it better. She was a little hesitant to tell the girl where it had come from given her brief history with Victor but supposed she would find out anyway. “Mr. Pembroke sent it to me. I trust you will keep that in confidence?”

“Of course, ma’am. Are you going to wear it to a party?” Patricia’s fingers moved over the beadwork. If it bothered her at all that Victor had given the dress to Cordelia, she didn’t show it. She was either good at hiding her feelings or she hadn’t felt much for him to begin with.

“I hadn’t thought about it yet,” Cordelia said. “I don’t really have a party to wear it to. My sister is the one who gets invited to all sorts of parties. Most likely because she doesn’t live out in the woods.” It was hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice. When she’d first seen the Whittemore estate she’d thought it beautiful and peaceful. Now she felt isolated and alone most of the time.

“You should have one,” Patricia said excitedly. “There was an excellent turnout at the last one, I’m sure that if you let everyone know you were playing again they’d come.” Her face lit up. “You could wear your beautiful necklace with it as well! They’d go nicely together.” She was almost more excited about the idea than Cordelia and her enthusiasm was infectious.

“You’re right. The dress may need alterations, though. It seems that it might be a bit long.”

“I’ll hang it up for the moment,” Patricia said, taking the dress to the closet. “I do hope you have your party, ma’am. It will be nice to not have to serve food and drink this time. I may even be able to enjoy a bit more of your music.”

“I’ll speak to my husband,” Cordelia said. It was the last thing she

wanted to do at the moment but a party meant that she could see Victor again without anyone thinking she was doing anything improper. "I'm sure he'll allow me to have it. Thank you for your suggestion, Patricia."

"You're quite welcome." She hung the dress up. "I'm going to get you some water for your flowers. I'll be back in a moment."

"Leave the door open," Cordelia said. "I'm going to go speak to my husband." She waited until Patricia was gone, then smiled at herself in the mirror. *What a wonderful idea*, she thought. At the last party she had even been able to dance with Victor. Any excuse to see him was a good one, even if it meant dealing with Arthur.

She had no idea why finding him with another lover made her so much angrier this time than last time, but she was getting close to the end of her patience. As much as she didn't want to end up destitute, she also didn't want to have to worry about walking in on her husband making love to another man every time she came around the corner.

The door to Arthur's office was closed and she knocked on it lightly. There was no answer from inside so she started back to her room, supposing she could ask him at dinner. Halfway down the hall she saw Arthur going toward her room as well and she narrowed her eyes. She'd made it explicitly clear that she didn't want to speak to him but this time she was going to make an exception.

"Cordelia," he said when he saw her. "I was coming to speak to you."

"I can see that," she said, keeping more than a hint of frost in her voice. She didn't want Arthur to think she'd forgiven him. "There was something I wanted to speak to you about as well."

"Oh really? Please go ahead." Arthur looked relieved that she wasn't going to start shouting again and Cordelia folded her arms over her chest.

"I would like to have another party," she said. "I'm tired of being alone out here all the time. We could invite everyone from last time, and a few more people besides. This time I'd like to have a real quartet though."

"Yes, of course. That would be lovely," he said, smiling at her. Cordelia kept her face impassive. "I was coming to tell you that I'm going to London for a couple of days. There are a couple of problems with Father's accounts that I can only take care of by going to the main branch of the bank. Do you need anything while I'm there?"

"Not that I can think of. Thank you for letting me know."

"When did you want to have your party? I'm leaving for London on Sunday. It's leaving it a bit late to have it beforehand but I'm certain we could still have a good turnout. In fact, having it on the

spur of the moment will make it more fun for some people.” He was still smiling and Cordelia managed to give him a small smile in return.

“All right,” she said. “I’d like to have it Saturday, then.”

“Very well,” Arthur said. “I shall go into town and have a rush put on some invitations. We shall spare no expense for this party, my darling. You won’t be disappointed.”

“Thank you,” Cordelia said. “And please send the seamstress up here. I have a dress I’d like to wear for the party and it likely needs alterations.”

“Of course.” He leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek and Cordelia moved away from him. Arthur cleared his throat. “Well. That’s all. I’ll be going into town now.”

“Take care.” She went back into her room and closed the door. Only when she was certain Arthur wasn’t going to try and talk to her further did she allow herself to break into a grin. She was going to have the most wonderful party, she was going to wear her beautiful dress and her grandmother’s necklace, and she was going to dance with Victor again.

She could hardly wait for Saturday.

Chapter 10

T rue to Arthur's word, the party was just as well-attended as the first had been, even on short notice. As Cordelia walked through the manor greeting her guests, it seemed they were all laughing and having a good time. Even the staff was in a good mood, with the hint of a smile appearing on Mrs. Richmond's face for a fraction of a second.

"Lady Whittemore," a woman called from a corner of the foyer. She waved Cordelia over with a smile. There was a glass of wine in her hand and it was already half gone. "This is a magnificent party. Thank you for inviting us."

"You're quite welcome," Cordelia said. She had no idea who the woman was but she seemed nice enough.

"It's rather fun doing something like this on the spur of the moment, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." The door opened and Birdie came in with the General, her usual grin on her face. "If you'll excuse me," she said to the lady, who nodded and stepped aside. "Birdie darling, I'm so glad you could make it." She hugged her sister and looked to the General. "So good to see you again too, General." He raised an eyebrow at her and she laughed. "Forgive me, Richard."

"Old habits," he sighed.

"Delia, that dress is incredible!" Birdie held her at arm's length and looked her up and down. "It's absolutely gorgeous. Is it French? It must be French."

"I'm not sure," Cordelia said. "The box said Ellery of London."

"The box?" Birdie frowned as Cordelia led her and the General into the house to put away their coats. "What do you mean? You didn't order it yourself?"

"No, it was sent to me anonymously," Cordelia said, deciding a little fib between sisters wasn't anything out of the ordinary. There was a little knot of people near the door and Cordelia stepped aside so a young man could move past her.

"Excuse me," he muttered without looking at her.

“Yes, of course.” Cordelia considered asking if he was leaving already but the majority of her attention was on Birdie and her compliments. “No card, nothing. It was simply delivered to the house a few days ago and I can’t say I’m upset about it.”

“I wouldn’t be either,” Birdie said. One of the housemen came forward to take her coat, which she shrugged off and handed to him, revealing a vibrant purple dress with a deep neck and an elegant sash. “You should have Arthur commission a painting of you in it. You look like royalty.”

“Where is Arthur? I wanted to speak to him about the work he was having done on his stables,” the General said. Cordelia smiled up at him as he took off his coat.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Probably talking business with one of the other guests. I’m sure if you walk around you’ll find him.” She pretended to think about it. “Perhaps try his study? He sometimes has brandy and cigars with the gentlemen there.”

“I’ll talk with him later,” the General said. “For now the main question on my mind is when we’re going to hear more of your magnificent piano playing? I do hope we haven’t missed it.” Cordelia laughed and shook her head.

“Of course not. I could never start playing without my darling sister. Birdie would never forgive me if I did.” She reached over and took her sister’s hand as if they were children. Birdie grinned and squeezed her hand tightly. “Now that you’re here I can start gathering the guests in the conservatory in a bit,” Cordelia said as they walked down the hall. “What do you think of grandmother’s necklace?”

“It looks perfect with your dress,” Birdie said. “It’s almost like they were made to go together. Whoever sent it to you must have some sort of intuition.” Behind them the door opened again and Cordelia looked over her shoulder. Her heart stopped when she saw Victor come in and she released Birdie’s hand.

“If you’ll excuse me, Birdie dear, I need to say hello to my guests.”

“Oh, of course. I’ll meet you in the conservatory.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Cordelia said with a smile. “Since Arthur doesn’t seem to be around, could you and Richard start moving guests toward the conservatory? The string quartet is scheduled to begin in the ballroom after my performance.” Birdie nodded and took her husband’s arm while Cordelia went to the door to see Victor.

“Good evening, Lady Whittemore,” he said, inclining his head politely. “You look quite beautiful this evening.”

“Thank you, Mr. Pembroke.” She looked around to see if anyone was listening, then lowered her voice for good measure. “I don’t know how to thank you. This dress is beautiful but far too extravagant. You really shouldn’t have.”

"It didn't look nearly as good in the shop as it does on you," Victor said. "It's as if you complete the dress." His words made Cordelia blush deeply and he smiled. "Thank you for inviting me tonight, I'm looking forward to hearing you play again."

"I hope I live up to your expectations," Cordelia said, motioning to the house. "Please come in. My sister Birdie is gathering people into the conservatory for my performance. I'm a bit nervous, to be honest. Monsieur DuVerne is here and I hope he won't judge me too harshly."

"I highly doubt that," Victor said. "He seems like a nice young man."

"Whom you really shouldn't have paid on my behalf," Cordelia said quietly. "My goodness, Mr. Pembroke, if anyone found out about the lessons and the dress---"

"No one will find out unless you tell them," Victor said with a sly smile. He looked around the hallway and, finding it empty, reached out to brush Cordelia's lips with his thumb. "Besides, it's more exciting when it's a secret isn't it?" Just this hint of contact was enough to set Cordelia on fire and she wanted him to keep touching her, but he nodded toward the hall that led to the conservatory instead. "Your audience awaits, madame."

When she stepped into the conservatory, Cordelia was surprised to see that it was even fuller than it had been at the previous party. It seemed that everyone who had attended then was there now, and more besides. Maurice was there and the members of the string quartet were there as well, but Arthur was nowhere in sight. Deciding she didn't care one way or the other if he showed his face, she went to her piano and faced the room.

"Thank you for coming tonight," she said. "I'm not certain where my husband is but I'm sure he'll join us momentarily. I'm going to go ahead and start so as not to hold up our very lovely performers, and I hope you enjoy these pieces I'm about to play." There was a round of polite applause and Cordelia sat down on the piano bench.

Where is Arthur, anyway? She couldn't help being a little annoyed. He was the one concerned about keeping up appearances for the time being, and as much as she liked being able to focus on Victor's attention she could only imagine what people were thinking. Cordelia shoved this out of her mind as she put her fingers on the keys and began to play.

Just as it had been every other time she played the piano, all her worries vanished in an instant. There was nothing in her mind but the music, and this time it was a lively piece that spoke of joy. Her fingers raced over the keys, painting the notes out of thin air and though she wasn't looking at them she could feel every eye in the room on her. She thought about Maurice and how he was going to teach her to

write down her own pieces, the music she felt bubbling up inside her, and her playing became faster and brighter. It was as if she was fanning a flame and couldn't think of anything she would like more than for it to light the entire room so everyone could feel and see what she felt.

When she finished, the applause that followed was the exact opposite of polite. It was loud, uncontrolled, and just as joyous as she felt. Someone shouted "*bravo!*" and Cordelia realized that she was breathing hard. She stood up from the piano and bowed, a little embarrassed but satisfied. She looked toward the bookshelves where Birdie, the General, and Victor were all standing, and was pleased to see that Birdie's face was shining with pride. Victor was grinning twice as widely as her sister, and she realized that it had been he who had shouted.

"Thank you," she said to the room in general as her eyes met Victor's. "You're all too kind. Thank you for indulging me and I do hope you enjoy the rest of your evening. There will be dancing in the ballroom in just a few minutes, and please help yourself to refreshments and drinks." There was another, smaller round of applause and she bowed again before everyone started to move around the room. Maurice came over to her immediately.

"Madame, you are even more talented than I first thought," he said. "At first I was confused because I did not recognize the piece you were playing but when I realized you were improvising on a baroque piece I was very impressed."

"Was I?" Cordelia blinked at him. "I honestly had no idea. I just played what was in my head."

"It was a magnificent performance," Victor said from just behind her and Cordelia turned in surprise. "I can scarcely believe you're the same woman I heard playing so tentatively the first time I visited this manor."

"My goodness, gentlemen, you're going to give me quite the ego," Cordelia laughed. "I'm just happy to be able to play. Monsieur DuVerne, thank you so much for coming."

"Of course, madame, of course. Now if you do not mind, I am going to the ballroom to hear this string quartet. Perhaps there will be a lady who would want to dance with me." Just as he said this, Patricia came back into the room. She was dressed very differently than she had been at the first party, wearing a pretty pink and white dress rather than a maid's uniform. Her position as a lady's maid gave her slightly higher status and the luxury of her choice of clothing for the night, putting her almost on Mrs. Richmond's level. Cordelia knew that it was giving the old woman fits but at that moment she didn't much care.

“Lady Whittemore, I wasn’t able to---“

“Patricia, you’re just in time.” Cordelia motioned for her to come over. When Patricia saw Victor, her face turned red and she looked away quickly. “I know you’ve heard me talk about Monsieur DuVerne. He’s looking for a dance partner.”

“Oh, I don’t think that would be proper,” Patricia said. Cordelia shook her head and folded her arms over her chest in a perfect imitation of Mrs. Richmond. She couldn’t help but think that Birdie would be proud.

“Nonsense,” Cordelia said. “I’m the lady of the house and I have nothing for you to do at the moment, so it won’t hurt a single thing for you to dance with this gentleman. If anyone has a problem with it, they can take it up with me.”

“It seems Madame has spoken,” Maurice said, offering Patricia his arm. “Shall we dance, mademoiselle?” She looked at Cordelia, eyes wide, then nodded and slipped her arm through his. With a smile, Maurice led her out of the room and Cordelia was alone with Victor.

“I hope she’ll be all right,” Cordelia said. “Mrs. Richmond will probably lecture me for days about it but I couldn’t think of another way to keep her from following me around all evening.” Victor laughed.

“Mrs. Richmond?”

“She was my sister’s and my governess when we were girls, and when I married Arthur she came with me as my lady’s assistant.” She sighed. “I just can’t seem to escape her.”

“Why you and not your sister?”

“Birdie married the General before I married Arthur,” Cordelia explained. “Unlike my husband, the General fell in love with Birdie when they met at a party.” She pressed a hand to her face. “I really have to get used to calling him Richard.”

“So yours was an arranged marriage,” Victor said. “I see.”

“I was supposed to be married first, of course, but Birdie met Richard while Father was still talking to the late Lord Whittemore. They had a whirlwind courtship, very romantic, and were married before Arthur’s father and mine even came to terms. Since I was the last to leave home, I got saddled with Mrs. Richmond.” Cordelia sighed. “I keep gently nudging her toward retiring but she refuses. I honestly think she’ll be around forever.”

“I’m glad she’s not around right now,” Victor said, stepping closer. “You really do look radiant in that dress, Lady Whittemore.”

“Please,” Cordelia said, shaking her head, “when we’re alone together, call me Cordelia.” Victor smiled at her, a very different one than his usual grin, and reached up to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. His finger brushed against her cheek and raised gooseflesh

on her skin.

"All right, Cordelia," he said. "What should we do now that we're alone together?" She didn't dare tell him what she really wanted, but Victor closed what distance remained between them and put a hand under her chin. "If you don't have any ideas, I certainly do."

"Mr. Pembroke---"

"So formal," he said, then kissed her. This time Cordelia put her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Victor pulled her close and their bodies pressed together. Cordelia could feel every inch of him through the thin fabric of the dress he'd bought her and it excited her in a way she'd never known.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she said when he released her. Victor smirked.

"Not here, certainly." He reached down and grabbed a handful of the beads that dangled from the dress' bodice. They slipped through his fingers and he grinned. "And this dress was far too expensive to ruin up against a wall." His words made Cordelia's face burn, but she was growing to like them. Unlike Arthur, he said exactly what he was thinking. "Is there somewhere more private we could go?"

"How private?" She looked up at him and he raised an eyebrow. There was no need for him to answer, and though everything she'd ever been taught about propriety was telling her to walk away from him, Cordelia nodded toward the door. "Follow me."

Judging from the music and laughter coming through the ballroom, nearly everyone was enjoying the string quartet and the refreshments. No one was near the stairs and Cordelia led Victor toward them, turning back only to make sure he was following. Victor was right behind her and she pressed a finger to her lips as she led him upstairs.

Once they were in her bedroom, Cordelia locked the door. The only person who had a key was the houseman, and even he would knock before using it. Victor watched her do it with amusement.

"Do you expect someone to try coming in here?"

"I'm just being careful," Cordelia said. Victor smiled at her and grabbed her waist to pull her to him. "I'm not like you, I don't do this all the time."

"That's a shame. But I've never done it before in a Lady's bedroom while her guests dance and drink her brandy." Warmth radiated off his body and Cordelia tilted her face up to his in the hopes he would kiss her again. "For you, I'll make an exception." He pulled her even closer and this time she could feel that he was hard against her thigh. The thought that she had made him that way sent heat spreading between her legs and she reached up to brush his hair off his forehead.

“Will you make love to me, Mr. Pembroke?”

“Victor, please,” he said, then leaned down to press his lips to hers. The dress he’d bought her left her entire neck and some of her chest exposed, so he was able to brush his lips from behind her ear to the hollow of her throat and Cordelia inhaled slowly, taking in his scent as he kissed her.

He backed her up against the bed and she sat down abruptly as her knees buckled, then lay back. Victor put a knee on the mattress and leaned over her kissing her again and again, his tongue slipping into her mouth in brief exploration as he cupped one breast through her gown. She wanted to feel his touch on her bare skin, and when he stood up to take off his jacket she did as well and turned her back to face him.

“Unbutton me?”

“With pleasure.” Victor undid her dress one button at a time, kissing her back each time until her dress fell off her hips and pooled on the floor. Each press of his lips inflamed her more and she couldn’t stifle a soft moan. While he undressed, Cordelia took off her underthings and lay back on the bed. This time when Victor climbed on top of her there was nothing between them and she put her arms around his neck. When she’d tried in vain to have Arthur do this it had been awkward from the beginning but Victor knew exactly what to do. He opened Cordelia’s legs and slid inside her, and the sensation of fullness made her lift her hips so he could go deeper. “You’ve done this before.”

“Not like this,” she said. “Please don’t stop.”

As Victor made love to her, Cordelia couldn’t stop thinking about how different it was from Arthur’s clumsy attempts. He wasn’t trying to get this over with as soon as possible, he was taking the time to make sure she felt every inch of him, every stroke, and it excited her more. She wrapped her legs around him to keep him inside her, even after his climax, and his groan of pleasure sent ripples through her own body until he rolled off her and pulled her into his arms.

“That was wonderful,” Cordelia said breathlessly. “I had no idea it could be like that.”

“It should be like that every time,” Victor said. “If I have my way it shall be.” He put a hand under his chin and kissed her gently. “As soon as Arthur divorces you, I want you to be mine.” Cordelia’s eyes widened. “You seem surprised, my dear.”

“I am,” she admitted. “I expected this to be like your other women.”

“You’re different,” he said. “I knew that the moment I saw you. When Arthur said he wanted to divorce you I could hardly believe it. I was certain there must be something wrong with you. You have no

idea how glad I was that the problem lay with him instead.”

“We should get back to the party,” Cordelia said reluctantly. She sat up and slid off the bed, hardly able to believe what Victor was saying. Suddenly she didn’t care about what Arthur could or could not do for her after the divorce. All she cared about was Victor.

“You’re right,” he said. “They’ll be missing their hostess, especially with the host keeping to himself.” He stood up and picked up his pants. “Where is Arthur anyway?”

“I have no idea,” Cordelia said with a smirk. “And I’m quite pleased by it.”

“Me too.”

They dressed quickly, Victor doing up her dress with surprising skill, and she kissed him quickly as she unlocked the door.

“You go first,” she said. “If anyone asks, you were looking for the water closet.” Victor nodded and looked both ways before he left the room, leaving Cordelia alone to look at her bed. They hadn’t pulled back the covers but the duvet was a mess, and she tugged on it so that it was straight in case Mrs. Richmond or the housemaid came in. Once she was sure Victor was back downstairs she left her bedroom and followed. She was just stepping off the last stair when Patricia hurried up to her, looking rather flustered.

“There you are, ma’am! I was looking all over for you.”

“I was a bit too vigorous with my dancing,” Cordelia lied. “I had to go upstairs and fix my hair a bit. It’s an absolute fright and I wasn’t able to put it right. I shall need your help for sure. What’s the matter?”

“I’m really worried,” Patricia said, biting her lip. “No one has seen Lord Whittemore all night, not since the beginning of the party. I’ve tried my best to look for him without letting anyone know what I was doing but I can’t find him and people are starting to leave.”

“Have you looked everywhere?” The last thing Cordelia wanted to think about at that moment was her husband but Patricia didn’t show any signs of giving up.

“Everywhere but his bedroom,” she said, lowering her voice. “I was honestly a little afraid to knock. Do you think he’s in there with someone? During the party?” Patricia looked scandalized and Cordelia could hardly imagine what her lady’s maid would say if she knew what had just happened between her mistress and the family lawyer while everyone was downstairs dancing.

“I suppose I’ll go,” Cordelia said unenthusiastically. If Arthur was with a man in his bedroom it would be the third time she’d walked in on him and she wasn’t looking forward to it. Patricia started to walk away and Cordelia grabbed her arm. “Oh no you don’t. If I have to see it, so do you.”

The two women walked to the other side of the second floor where Arthur's bedroom was located, Patricia lagging slightly behind her mistress. The door was closed, of course, and Cordelia raised her hand to knock on it, steeling herself for whatever she might find. Her knock echoed through the hall and she waited for her husband to answer. When he didn't, she knocked again.

"Arthur, are you in there? The guests are starting to leave and you need to say goodbye." Still no answer, and Cordelia's temper flared. She put her ear against the door and, hearing nothing, grabbed the knob. Patricia put a hand on her arm.

"Should we really just go in?"

"We absolutely should," Cordelia said. "He's acting like a child hiding in there and I'm sick of it. I don't care whose arse I see, I'm going in right now." Her choice of words widened Patricia's eyes in shock and she twisted the knob. "Arthur, I'm coming in right now so you and whoever's in there with you had best be decent."

The bedroom was dark when the door swung open, and it was Cordelia's first clue that something wasn't right. The sheets on the bed were rumpled and piled oddly, making her frown slightly. The housemaid would have fixed the bed if the room was empty, even during a party, and she stepped into the room.

As she got closer to the bed, she could see that someone was in it. From the position of the body, Cordelia could tell at once that something wasn't right. When a hint of moonlight crept around the edge of the curtain, she knew for sure. She spoke to Patricia without turning away, her voice shaking just a little.

"Patricia, go downstairs right away and tell the houseman that we need the police."

"Ma'am?" Patricia took a step forward, then pressed both hands over her mouth. "My God! Is that Lord Whittemore? Is he *dead*?"

"We need the police," Cordelia said again. "Right away." Patricia nodded and ran for the stairs while Cordelia moved closer to the bed. Arthur was indeed dead, and judging from the blood on his clothes and the sheets it hadn't been quick.

Who could have done this?

Chapter 11

By the time everyone was finally out of the manor it was well

after midnight. Once the police arrived and turned the estate from a party to a crime scene, no one wanted to leave. They were all more interested in trying to get a glimpse of what had happened, though the police officers were doing their best to keep people downstairs. After hours of arguing with various partygoers, the police ordered them out of the house.

The only people left were Cordelia, Birdie and the General, and Victor, who was allowed to stay as he was the family lawyer. The staff had been confined to the servants' quarters, protected by a pair of officers, and the manor was almost silent. Cordelia sat in shock on the loveseat in the study, with Birdie beside her holding her hands.

"When did you first notice your husband was missing, Lady Whittemore?" The police officer that stood before her was an older man, and Cordelia was certain he outranked all the others she'd seen. He had a large mustache and she focused on it while she spoke to him.

"I thought it strange that he wasn't there to listen to my performance," Cordelia said. "But I suppose I assumed he would be along later. I didn't think to look for him."

"Why not?"

"To be honest, sir, he and I were not on the best of terms at the moment." Her eyes flicked over to Victor's, then Birdie's. "We had an argument and things had been rather cool since then." Birdie frowned at her.

"You didn't tell me that, Delia. What were you fighting about?"

"Please let me ask the questions, Mrs. Ellison," the officer said impatiently. "You had a fight with your husband, the people I spoke to downstairs said they hadn't seen you since the piano performance, and you were the one to find him dead. You can see how that looks suspicious."

"You can't honestly believe that," Birdie said, her brown eyes fierce. "My sister would never kill anyone. Besides, she was with her lady's maid when she found Arthur's body. It's not as if she pretended

to find him by accident.”

“We’ve spoken to Miss Parker,” the officer said, and for a moment Cordelia wondered who he was talking about. “Or rather we’ve tried to. She’s rather shaken up at the moment. Can’t stop crying long enough to say anything other than she’s never seen a dead person before.”

“If you’re accusing Lady Whittemore of something, then come out and say it,” Victor said. “Otherwise she will speak to you further in the morning. She’s had a long, difficult evening and needs to get some rest.”

“Fine,” the officer said, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked down at her. “You’re not to leave the estate tonight, though. I’ll be stationing a couple of officers outside the door just in case anyone tries to get in or out.”

“That’s not necessary,” the General said. “My wife and I will be staying with Lady Whittemore tonight.” He looked at Victor. “I assume her attorney will want to return to his home but we will be more than happy to look out for her.” Cordelia looked over at Victor. She wanted him to stay more than anything but with the General and Birdie in the manor they wouldn’t be able to be alone together, so there was little point.

“If it’s all the same to you, General Ellison, I’d like to stay the night as well. It seems there is ample room in the manor for all of us and I’d like to be close by in case the police feel the need to question Lady Whittemore again.” He folded his own arms across his chest and Cordelia was able for the first time to understand how intimidating he probably was in court.

“There you have it,” the General said. “She’s in good hands with all of us here. You have nothing to worry about where Lady Whittemore is concerned.” He put a hand on Cordelia’s shoulder and she looked up at him, grateful.

“All right,” the officer said. “We’ll be back to speak to you again in the morning.” He started for the door and Victor followed him. The General stepped around the couch and went behind them.

“I’ll see you out.”

As soon as he was gone, Birdie leaned over and hugged her sister tightly. The warmth of her arms made tears well up in Cordelia’s eyes and a moment later she was crying. Birdie patted her back as Cordelia had done hundreds of times when they were children, murmuring that things would be all right. Cordelia sat up straight and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and Birdie opened her pocketbook and took out a delicately embroidered handkerchief.

“Here,” she said gently. “Wipe your face.”

“Thank you,” Cordelia said, taking the handkerchief. “I’m sorry for

being so dramatic.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Birdie said with a smile. “You just found your husband murdered at your party. I’m surprised you haven’t been screaming since you opened the door.” She reached up and tucked Cordelia’s hair behind her ear. Between the long night and her time with Victor, it had fallen almost completely out of the updo Patricia had been so proud of that morning. “Do you have any idea who could have done this?”

“No,” Cordelia said. “I don’t. It had to have happened during the party, though. He was alive this afternoon.” She shook her head. “In fact, he rode down to town and came back just before people started to arrive. The last time I saw him was when he went upstairs to change clothes.”

“There were so many guests,” Birdie sighed. “It’s hard to believe someone could have done such a thing.” She took Cordelia’s hands. “Will you be all right, sleeping alone?”

“Of course I will,” Cordelia said. “I sleep in my own room all the time.” Birdie gave her a curious look and Cordelia realized that she’d never told her sister that she and Arthur slept in different rooms. It was unlikely that she and the General were in a similar arrangement and she was suddenly embarrassed to tell her. “Arthur snores,” she lied. “Snores, I mean. I could hardly sleep most nights.”

“Poor thing.” The door opened again and the two men returned without the police officer. The General looked as if he was starting to get a headache. Victor looked less than pleased as well and Cordelia frowned at them.

“What’s going on?”

“They’re down at the servants’ quarters questioning all the staff,” Victor said with disgust. “After midnight and they’ve got all of them awake asking who they saw, and all sorts of nonsense. They seem determined to make everyone in this estate’s life miserable because they haven’t got the first clue who did this.”

“You should get some rest, Cordelia,” the General said. “I don’t know my way around your kitchen or I would make you a cup of strong tea. However, I do recall where Arthur kept his brandy. I’m going to get you some of it.”

“Thank you, Richard.” Cordelia smiled up at him.

“I’m going back down to the servants’ quarters to see if I can’t get them to leave the staff alone,” Victor said. “There’s no call for it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Pembroke.” Their eyes met again, briefly, then he turned and walked out of the room with the General. Cordelia thought she heard them saying something about having some brandy as well and she couldn’t help smiling. “Men,” she said. “Always have to be doing something, don’t they?”

"They really do," Birdie said. Her eyes drifted to the ceiling. Arthur's room wasn't directly above them but she couldn't know that. "I'm so sorry they're making you stay here tonight, Delia. I'd much rather you come stay with us. It's going to be so creepy sleeping down the hall from a murder scene."

"Here's that drink for you, Cordelia," the General said, striding into the room and handing his sister-in-law a glass. It was half-full of amber liquid and her eyes widened. "You don't have to drink it all at once."

"What about me?" Birdie stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Why don't I get a drink of brandy as well?"

"I didn't know you wanted one," the General said amiably. He handed his glass of brandy to his wife. "There you are, my love."

"Hmph." Birdie lifted the glass to her lips and took a drink, keeping an eye on her husband over the rim. In spite of the situation, Cordelia found herself laughing a little. Surprised by her sister's outburst, Birdie took an enormous gulp of brandy and started coughing at once. This made Cordelia laugh in earnest, more so when the General started thumping her little sister on the back. The whole scene would have scandalized her parents but Cordelia didn't care. There would be plenty of time to cry and ache. This was what she needed right now.

"Cordelia!" Victor shouted from the hall, and the panic in his voice froze her blood. She looked up to see him burst through the door. "It's your Mrs. Richmond!"

"Mrs. Richmond?" Both Cordelia and Birdie spoke at once, and Cordelia stood up. Birdie thrust her glass into the General's hands and he set it aside.

"What's happened?"

"I went down to stop the questioning," Victor said, out of breath. "They were getting out of hand and one of them started trying to push the staff around, and Mrs. Richmond got in their faces. She was shouting one of the officers down, then clutched her chest and fell down." He grabbed Cordelia by the wrist and pulled her into the hall. "Come on, they're sending for the doctor right now."

"Oh my God," Cordelia said, looking over her shoulder at Birdie. She was right on her heels with the General and Cordelia looked at Victor. "Is she awake? Is she breathing?"

"She was breathing when I came to get you," he said. "I don't know if she's conscious. I came to get you before I checked just in case she got worse." He seemed to realize he was still pulling her along and released her arm. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's all right," she said, wishing he would have just kept holding on.

The four of them ran down the stairs and across the driveway to the modest building where the live-in staff were housed. Birdie was holding her skirt up so high that Cordelia could almost see her knickers while Cordelia was doing her best to keep her beautiful gown out of the dirt. She was vaguely aware that the men were behind them but all she could think about at that moment was the old woman who had been with her since she was born.

They found Mrs. Richmond lying on the couch, partially covered with a blanket. She was still wearing the muted brown dress she'd worn to the party but someone had been kind enough to remove her shoes. Cordelia looked her over, searching for a sign of life and was relieved when she saw Mrs. Richmond's chest rising and falling slowly.

"I think it's her heart, ma'am," the carriage driver said quietly. "She's not as young as she was and them officers got her worked up."

"They've sent Wesley for the doctor," said the cook. "Rode off down to Greenley like his pants were on fire."

"That's good," Cordelia said, falling to her knees beside the couch. Wesley was one of the stable boys and loved riding horses as hard and fast as he could. If anyone could get to the doctor quickly, it was him. She reached out and took Mrs. Richmond's hand. It was cool and limp, but when it moved ever so slightly in Cordelia's grasp her eyes filled with tears again.

"Cordelia Whittemore," she said weakly. "What on earth are you doing on the floor?"

"Don't try to speak," Cordelia said, swiping a tear away from her cheek. "They've gone for the doctor. You just rest right now."

"Those men," Mrs. Richmond said, scowling. "Thinking they can just come in here and bully people. I'll expect a full apology from them." She closed her eyes. "I shall speak to their superiors." That she was still able to summon enough anger to complain about the officers' behavior was encouraging and Cordelia smiled.

"You do that," she said, patting Mrs. Richmond's hand. "You do just that." Letting go of the old woman's hand, Cordelia looked around. Patricia was sitting in the corner crying quietly and she went to the girl. "Patricia?"

"Oh, Lady Whittemore," Patricia looked up at her and rubbed her eyes with her handkerchief. From the looks of it, it was soaked. "I'm so sorry, I should have been looking for Lord Whittemore instead of dancing. If I had he might still be alive."

"Don't be ridiculous," Cordelia said. "What if you'd walked in on the murderer? You could have been hurt as well." She was fully aware that the entire staff plus Victor and her family were watching, but she put her arms around Patricia as well. "Come with us," she said kindly.

"I want you to sleep in the manor with us this evening."

"Oh no, ma'am!" Patricia's eyes were wide with fright. "I'd rather sleep out here. What if whoever did it is still in the house?"

"The police went through the entire house," Victor offered. "There's no one there who's going to harm you or any of us." Patricia shook her head.

"No," she said. "Thank you very much for your kindness but I'm going to stay here."

"Whatever you think is best," Cordelia said, turning back at Mrs. Richmond. Birdie had sat on the edge of the couch and was looking down at her former governess with a tenderness she couldn't remember ever seeing on her sister's face. Cordelia met Victor's gaze and he nodded almost imperceptibly toward the door.

Cordelia followed him out onto the porch of the servants' quarters and closed the door behind her. It was dark and cool outside, with only the moonlight to illuminate them. Victor spoke quietly, just in case anyone was listening.

"They're going to want to know where you were when it happened," he said. "Your lady's maid said she thought you were dancing but no one could remember seeing you." Victor shook his head. "Either you're going to have to tell them about us or we have to figure out who killed Arthur while I do my best to keep you out of jail."

"Then I'll tell them," Cordelia said. Victor looked at her in surprise and she looked into his eyes. They were so blue she could have gotten lost in them were the situation more pleasant. "You said you wanted to be with me. If it proves my innocence, I don't give a damn about my reputation."

"You're not thinking clearly," Victor said. "This isn't the time to make a decision like that." He reached out and touched her face. His hand was cool on her warm face, but more vital than Mrs. Richmond's and she closed her eyes. "I do want to be with you, Cordelia. We must be careful, though."

"Delia?" Birdie's voice was very near the door and Victor pulled his hand away as if he had been burned. The door opened and Birdie looked out. "There you are. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, as much as it can be." Before she had to come up with a way to explain why she was on the porch with Victor, a horse came thundering up the main drive. It was definitely Wesley, who had Dr. Timms on the back of his horse as well, holding on to the younger man.

"Lady Whittemore," the doctor said, getting off the horse. He looked shaken and she went down the stairs to greet him. "Your young man said it was urgent. What's happened?"

“It’s Mrs. Richmond,” Cordelia said, deciding she didn’t have the strength to go into detail about what had happened to Arthur. The police had brought their own doctor to declare Arthur dead and though she knew their family doctor would hear about it the next day she couldn’t make herself do it right then. Mrs. Richmond was the one that was important. “She seems to have had some sort of episode. We think it’s her heart.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Dr. Timms said. “Every time I see her I tell her she needs to retire but she just tells me I don’t know what I’m talking about.” Cordelia led him up the stairs and he nodded to both Victor and Birdie.

“Birdie, dear,” Cordelia said to her sister, “could you please show Dr. Timms where Mrs. Richardson is? I just need to speak to Mr. Pembroke a moment more.”

“Of course,” Birdie said. She opened the door for the doctor and they went inside. Wesley went to put the horse away and Cordelia waited until they were completely alone to turn to Victor.

“I have no intention of causing more trouble for myself than I’ve already got to deal with but I’m also not going to be sent to jail for something I didn’t do when the answer is as simple as admitting to cheating on my unfaithful husband.” It sounded terrible when she said it aloud and Victor’s face was expressionless for a moment, making Cordelia wonder if she’d said the wrong thing. Then he stepped forward, grabbed her and kissed her more forcefully than any man had ever done before.

“Nothing’s ever simple where the law is concerned,” Victor said when he let go of her. “I’ll do my best to protect you, Cordelia, but you must not go making things harder for yourself than they are. Unless they specifically try to arrest you, don’t tell the police anything.” He smirked. “Give me the night to figure out how to handle this while I sleep down the hall from you and try not to think about how soft your lips are.” He opened the door to the servants’ quarters while Cordelia was still speechless and went inside, leaving her on the porch.

Cordelia leaned against the railing that surrounded the porch and looked up at the manor. The last thing she wanted was to sleep alone that night, but if Victor was determined to keep their tryst a secret for the night she would have to. She sighed deeply. She’d never gone looking for trouble in her life, but now it seemed that trouble had come to her doorstep anyway. Cordelia took a deep breath, then walked back into the servants’ quarters to check on Mrs. Richmond.

Chapter 12

After a very long night in which it seemed that no one in the

Whittemore manor got any sleep, Victor had a very subdued breakfast with the Ellisons and Cordelia. Mrs. Richmond had been taken back to town by the doctor, who wanted to keep a close eye on her overnight, and Patricia had made an appearance only to help Cordelia dress before going back to the servants' quarters.

"It's all so ridiculous," Cordelia said as she walked Victor out to the stable where he'd put up his horse the night before. "I just have no idea what I'm supposed to do. I've never dealt with anything like this before. Do I contact the mortuary? I don't have any mourning clothes, I don't even know where one would buy them. If Mrs. Richmond was here she'd be able to tell me exactly what to do but---" Victor kissed her, cutting her off midsentence. Cordelia seemed happy to have been interrupted, and reluctant to let him stop.

"I'll contact the mortuary about Arthur's funeral arrangements. I was his attorney so he left his wishes with me. Of course I'll handle all the legal aspects of things as well, that goes without saying. I'm sure between you and your extremely enthusiastic sister, you can find a black dress or two." This made Cordelia sigh and he smiled. "What?"

"I look terrible in black. Oh, Victor." His name sounded wonderful coming out of her mouth, though he did wish it would have been under better circumstances. "I just don't know how I'm supposed to feel. I'm upset that he's dead of course, I never would have wished him to die like this. But he didn't want me. He was trying to find a way of divorcing me without losing his money. As terrible and cruel as it sounds, I'm almost happy to be free of the whole thing."

"Don't let anyone hear you say that," Victor said, dropping his voice. "If something like that got passed to the police, you'd really be in trouble." He took her hands. "Remember, don't talk to the police unless I'm with you. If they come out here again, be polite and cooperate but don't tell them anything until you speak with me."

"All right," Cordelia said. "Thank you for staying with us last night."

“It was my pleasure, difficult though it was for me to sleep knowing how close you were.” They went into the stable where Victor’s horse was saddled and ready. “I’ll come back up here later and check up on you. I assume your sister and her husband will be here as well?”

“I’m not sure,” Cordelia said. “Their son is with the governess but I’m not sure how soon they need to be back.” She smiled. “Not right away, I hope. This house was too big for two people, it’s almost terrifying to think about being alone in it.”

“You’ll do fine, I’m sure.” Victor patted her hand, then climbed on his horse. “If you’re really uncomfortable, you can always go stay with them for a while.” Cordelia gave him a look that plainly said she wasn’t going to even consider such a suggestion and he laughed. “Goodbye, Lady Whittemore.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Pembroke.” She stepped out of the horse’s path and went toward the servants’ quarters while Victor went down the drive toward Greenley.

He’d always thought that the Whittemore estate was too far out in the woods for anything like this to happen, and as he rode back to his own house his mind wandered. Whoever had killed Arthur was more than likely someone he knew. There hadn’t been any signs that there was a struggle in the bedroom before he was killed, or that someone had broken in. He made a mental note to ask Cordelia if there had been any guests before the party the next time he saw her.

It was early enough in the morning that Victor doubted he would have any clients waiting for him at the office, so he went to his house instead. If someone showed up, Bradley could always entertain them for a few minutes. Maybe by poisoning them with some of his coffee.

When he walked into his house, however, all thoughts of Cordelia and Arthur were swept out of his head. Victor had precisely two servants, a maid and a middle-aged man called Brian that took care of the house, and it was Brian who met him at the door with an envelope in his hand.

“Good morning sir,” he said. “Did you have a good evening?”

“Not really, no,” Victor said, walking past him. Brian had been with him since before he moved to Greenley so he had long since become accustomed to Victor’s coming home at all hours. “One of my top clients got murdered at the party I went to and I spent the night trying to keep the police from arresting his widow.” It was a strange word to use in relation to Cordelia but he supposed that’s what she was now. “How was your evening?”

“Quiet as always,” Brian said. “I read a book and when it became apparent you weren’t coming home for dinner, I went to bed.” He followed Victor to the bedroom. “Your dinner is in the icebox, by the

way. I didn't bother making breakfast."

"Thank you," Victor said, taking off his jacket and throwing it across his bed. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been offered his dinner for breakfast, but he'd already eaten at the Whittemore manor and didn't think he could get a second meal down so soon. Brian lingered in the doorway watching him undress and Victor raised an eyebrow at him. "Something the matter, Brian?"

"This letter came for you yesterday," he said, and Victor realized he was still holding out the envelope. "It's from Surrey."

"Surrey?" Victor stopped in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt and grabbed the envelope. There was only one person who sent him mail at home and they didn't live in Surrey. He tore the letter open and unfolded it while Brian very politely made himself scarce.

Victor's eyes moved over the letter once, then twice, and he cursed as he threw it on the nightstand. There was nothing he could do about it at the moment, though, so he vented his frustration by taking off his clothes as if they had done him a great personal wrong and throwing them into the hamper. He snatched a fresh suit from his closet and dressed quickly, then brushed his hair and stuffed the letter into his jacket pocket.

"Is everything all right, sir?" Brian watched him from one of the wing-back chairs in the living room and Victor scowled at him. "Oh, the news was that good then. Have a good day, sir." He was just as used to not hearing a farewell from his master as he was to him turning up drunk in the middle of the night, and Victor wondered sometimes if Brian didn't do a bit of drinking of his own when he wasn't there. It wouldn't surprise him. Being the valet to a single man was probably fairly boring.

I don't have time for this, Victor thought as he went to his office. *Surrey? How in the hell did she get herself to Surrey?*

"Mr. Pembroke," a voice said as he walked up the steps to his office. Victor turned to see the chief of police coming up the walk. "I'm glad I ran into you. Your assistant said you hadn't come in yet."

"I was speaking to my valet about a personal matter," Victor said cautiously. This wasn't one of the officers from the night before, this was the chief of police. If he was coming to see him, something was definitely going on. "How can I help you, Chief?"

"The final cause of death on Lord Whittemore was exsanguination due to multiple stab wounds to his torso," he replied. "Ten stab wounds, to be precise."

"Ten?" Victor's eyes widened. "Good Lord. I can't think of anyone who would want to stab Arthur Whittemore once, much less ten times."

"It was definitely someone with a lot of anger toward him. You

were his attorney,” the chief said, his casual tone putting Victor on alert, “do you know of anyone who had a grudge against him? Maybe someone he’d made a bad business deal with?”

“Not that he ever mentioned to me,” Victor said carefully. “I only became his attorney recently, though, after my partner passed away. We never spoke about business matters really, just the late Lord Whittemore’s estate. There were a few strange things about the will that I was working on for him.”

“What sort of strange things?”

“You know perfectly well I’m not allowed to discuss that with you,” Victor said. “Just because everyone who’s had a hand in the damn thing is dead but me doesn’t mean I’m going to start telling you all about it.”

“If it has something to do with his death, you can be compelled to tell us, Mr. Pembroke. Surely you realize that.” The chief’s tone was still conversational but the threat beneath the surface was there all the same. “Anyhow, I just wanted to pass along that information. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t spread that around.”

“I would hope you know me better than that,” Victor said, opening the door to his office. “Please keep me informed of any developments.” Not waiting for a reply, he went inside and closed the door behind him.

“Good morning, sir,” Bradley said as he walked past his desk. “The police chief was looking for you. Did he find you on the way in?”

“He did, thank you. Did anyone else come by?”

“No sir. It’s been quiet this morning so far.” Victor could tell it was quiet from the men’s magazine Bradley was reading, but he couldn’t really fault him for it. There wasn’t much he could do without Victor. “Is everything all right?”

“Fantastic,” Victor said sarcastically as Bradley gave him his mail. “I suppose you’re going to hear about it soon enough but Lord Whittemore was murdered last night.”

“He what?” Bradley’s eyes widened. “After the party?”

“During the party it seems,” Victor said. “The police came out after Lady Whittemore and her lady’s maid discovered the body.” Bradley looked like he was going to ask more questions and Victor held up a hand. “I’ll tell you more later. For now I just need to be alone to think.” He looked around. “Where’s Miss Wright?”

“I’m not sure,” Bradley said. “I must confess I assumed she was with you.”

“For God’s sake, Bradley,” Victor said. “What kind of man do you think I am? No, never mind, don’t answer that.” He went into his office and closed the door, then took out the letter and opened it again as he leaned against the desk.

Dear Victor, it read. I know this is rather sudden but I wanted to send a letter to let you know that I've moved to Surrey. I thought I'd found a gentleman who could overlook my situation but I seem to have found myself in even more of a predicament. I'm going to need a bit of assistance so if you could send some money as soon as possible to this address we would really appreciate it.

All my love, Catherine.

"Damn it all," Victor said, refolding the letter. He didn't have time to deal with it at the moment. As much as he loved Catherine, he had his own problems to worry about. He frowned as he tried to think about what his next move should be.

Victor had a pretty good idea of why Arthur was killed. Whether it was a jealous lover or a fight that had gotten out of hand didn't matter. The question was who had done it. According to Cordelia, he'd brought his lovers in and out of the house before but she'd given him the impression that there was no one he saw regularly. There was no way to start trying to figure out which of Arthur's lovers had killed him if he didn't even know where to begin looking.

Had Arthur's parents been alive, Victor supposed he would have to be much more careful in his investigation to make sure he didn't offend anyone or dirty the Whittemore name. With everyone but Cordelia in their grave he was free to be a bit more open, but he didn't want to embarrass her in front of the entire town. He knew from experience that there were people who would somehow blame her for Arthur's indiscretions, and that was the last thing he wanted.

He supposed the best place to start looking was the pub where he'd first heard the rumors about Arthur keeping company with men. It wouldn't officially be open for another hour yet but he knew there was usually someone there earlier, and it would probably be for the best if he started asking his questions before the patrons started to stumble in.

Still deep in thought, he picked up his satchel and stuck the letter into it. There were too many things on his mind and he knew he needed to focus if he was going to be any use to Cordelia at all. He hadn't been lying when he said he wanted to be with her, hadn't even been stretching the truth. If she were to lose everything tomorrow, he wanted to be there to help her pick up the pieces. Before any of that, though, he had to make sure she stayed out of jail.

"Where are you off to?" Bradley met him at the door to his office with a cup of tea.

"Pub," Victor said. "I need to talk to a couple of people and see if I can figure out who might have been sharing Lord Whittemore's bed besides his wife." He picked up the tea and drained the cup, needing the boost it would give him. "Thank you, Bradley."

“Shouldn’t you leave that to the police detectives?” The boy followed him to the front door. “That’s their job.”

“At the moment I know a few things they don’t,” Victor said. “And the police last night seemed determined to place this on Lady Whittemore. Seeing as how she’s the only client I have left in that family, my priority is keeping her out of jail.”

“I can’t believe they’d try and blame her,” Bradley said. “I’ve only met her once or twice but she seemed like a nice, quiet lady. Very proper.”

“Yes, quite. I shall return in a little while.” He went out the front door and down the steps, brushing past Miss Wright on the way. “Good morning,” he said absently as he passed. She smiled at him and returned the greeting, and for a moment he had the feeling that he’d seen her at the party the night before. “Where were you last night, Miss Wright?”

“Me?” She looked surprised. “My mother has been ill, so my brother and I were making dinner for her and cleaning her house.”

“You weren’t at a party?”

“Me? Oh goodness, no,” Miss Wright said. “Apart from never being invited to any, I don’t have time for that sort of thing.”

“I see. Thank you anyway. I’ll be back in a little while, so if anyone comes for me they can either wait or come back in a few hours.” Miss Wright nodded and went into the office and Victor went down the stairs, his mind half on the pub and half on Cordelia. He hoped things were going all right for her at the manor.

Chapter 13

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Birdie looked closely at

Cordelia as she stared at the blank sheet music in front of her. At a loss for what else she should do, she had taken out her music to start copying it the way Maurice had told her, but she hadn’t been able to focus.

“Yes,” Cordelia said. “As well I can be, anyhow.” A large part of her was angry, and it was that rather than sadness that was making it hard for her to concentrate. She’d made love to a man who truly cared about her the night before, she should have been reliving those wonderful memories in her head instead of seeing her husband murdered in his bed. Now instead of playing the piano she was wearing the black dress she’d worn to her father-in-law’s funeral and trying not to think about how this was all Arthur’s fault.

It was obvious to her that Arthur had been killed by one of his lovers but she couldn’t exactly tell the police something like that. For one thing it sounded so sordid and dirty, never mind that she now had a lover of her own. Also, admitting that Arthur had preferred men to her made her feel guilty somehow, as if it was through some failing of her own that he had sought them out.

There was a knock on the door of the conservatory, and with Mrs. Richmond gone it had fallen to Arthur’s former valet to announce the presence of a guest.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. “There’s a gentleman here to discuss Lord Whittemore’s funeral arrangements.”

“Oh?” Cordelia looked up with a frown. “I thought Mr. Pembroke was going to take care of all that for me.” The valet nodded.

“Yes, but there are still a few things you’re going to need to settle with them.”

“All right, send them in,” Cordelia said with a sigh. She put her sheet music back into its folder and set it aside. “I don’t know what all they want or what I’m even supposed to be approving. I do wish Mrs. Richmond was here. At the very least she would know what to do, seeing as how she had to make the arrangements for her husband.”

“Good morning, Lady Whittemore.” The door opened again and a gentleman in a police officer’s uniform came through the door with his hat in his hands. “Forgive me for the intrusion.”

“Good morning,” Cordelia said cautiously. “I was under the impression that I was meeting with someone about my late husband’s funeral arrangements.”

“I’ll leave you to speak to them in just a few minutes,” the officer said. “Provided I get the information from you that I’m looking for.” He extended a hand to her and Cordelia shook it without getting up. “I’m Arnold Christianson, one of the police detectives from Elston.”

“Elston?” Birdie stood up. “What are you doing here, then?”

“Greenley doesn’t really have much in the way of detectives,” Mr. Christianson said. “Seeing as how this is a very important case, they asked me to come down here and look into it. Fresh eyes and all that, you know.”

“I’ll tell you whatever I can,” Cordelia said, motioning to one of the chairs that sat around the small table where she and Birdie had been sitting. “Please feel free to have a seat.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Mr. Christianson remained standing. “I only have a few questions. I’ve spoken to a number of people this morning, and they said the same thing your guests told the police last night. No one at the party saw you after your performance until you discovered your husband’s body. It seems rather convenient, wouldn’t you say?”

“If I’d murdered my husband in cold blood while my guests were dancing downstairs, don’t you think I would have had blood all over my clothes? Besides that, my lady’s maid was with me when I found him. I wasn’t alone.” There was something Cordelia didn’t like about this detective. He seemed different from the officers the night before. Colder.

“According to the report, Lord Whittemore was stabbed to death. There were multiple wounds, which suggests that someone was very angry with him. If it was a crime of passion rather than premeditated murder, the courts might go a bit easier on whoever committed it.” He tilted his head slightly. “Arguments get out of hand sometimes. You can’t really be blamed for something that happens in the heat of the moment.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting that my sister had anything to do with Arthur’s death,” Birdie said, taking offense on Cordelia’s behalf. “That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“Clothes can be washed or thrown away,” the detective said, ignoring Birdie. “A lady’s maid isn’t much of an alibi. She’s going to say whatever you tell her to say, and she might even be the one who helped you get rid of the evidence. If that’s the case, then your defense that it was committed in the heat of the moment goes out the

window.”

“I’m not putting forward a defense because I didn’t do anything wrong,” Cordelia said. “I didn’t kill my husband.” She realized that in talking to the detective she was doing exactly what Victor had warned her against but it was too late to stop, otherwise he would really suspect her.

“How can you stand there and accuse a grieving widow of murdering her husband?” Birdie’s face was a mask of anger and she folded her arms across her chest. “This is ridiculous. I want you out of this house immediately.”

“I’ll leave as soon as your sister tells me where she was when Lord Whittemore was murdered,” Mr. Christianson said. He turned to Cordelia. “If you don’t tell me the truth about what you were doing, you’ll be leaving with me.” His eyes were cold as they moved over Cordelia’s face. “You can spend the night in the comfort of your own home or in a jail cell. It’s up to you.”

“This is ridiculous,” Birdie said again. She turned to her sister. “Just tell him where you were, Delia. Before he tries to make up some sort of horrible lie about you.” Cordelia’s heart sped up as both the detective and Birdie stared at her. Victor had said not to talk to the police unless he was with her but there was no way for her to get in touch with him and the detective was threatening her with jail. She didn’t know what else to do and there was nowhere to run.

“I was here,” she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. “After my performance I came upstairs with Mr. Pembroke.”

“Your attorney?” The detective looked at her closely. “What were the two of you doing?”

“What do you think?” Cordelia knew she should be polite but she couldn’t help being cold to the man. “Use your imagination if you must.”

“You were having an affair with your attorney,” Mr. Christianson said. “While you had guests in the house? That was rather bold of you. How long has this been going on?”

“It hasn’t been,” Cordelia said, afraid to look at Birdie for fear of the disappointment she would see. “Last night was the first time.”

“And Mr. Pembroke will admit to this as well?”

“Yes,” Cordelia said. “I’m sure he will. Is that all? Are you finished with me?”

“For the moment, yes,” the detective said. “If Mr. Pembroke corroborates your story, we’ll start exploring other avenues.” He looked her up and down and Cordelia narrowed her eyes at him. “Before I go, do you have any idea who might have killed your husband if it wasn’t you?”

“It wasn’t me,” Cordelia snapped. “And of course I don’t know who

might've done it. Don't you think I would tell you if I did?"

"Good day to you, Lady Whittemore," the detective said, putting on his hat. "I shall send in the gentleman for the funeral arrangements." With that, he left the conservatory and Cordelia stared at the place he'd vacated. She was halfway afraid to turn to her sister, afraid to see what was in Birdie's eyes. She'd never lied to her little sister before she'd married Arthur. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she looked at Birdie.

"I'm sorry, Birdie."

"I knew something was the matter between the two of you," Birdie said, her eyes wide. "You and Arthur, I mean. But why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to think poorly of me," Cordelia admitted. "Though I suppose that's unavoidable now, isn't it?"

"Delia, I don't think poorly of you," Birdie said, hugging her sister. "Will you please explain to me what's going on, though? Were things really so bad between you and Arthur that you had to have an affair with Mr. Pembroke?"

"I'll explain everything," Cordelia said with a smile. Tears of relief were standing in her eyes. Her dear little sister didn't think badly of her and the truth was out. With Arthur dead the only thing she had to worry about was her reputation, and if Victor was willing to be with her she didn't have to worry as much about ending up broke in the streets. She might not be as wealthy as she was now, but at least she wouldn't be reduced to washing clothes to make ends meet. "I do wish I'd confided in you before. Maybe things would have ended differently."

"It's all right," Birdie said, kissing her on the cheek as a sallow-looking gentleman came in with a thick book under his arm and a satchel in his hand. "We'll get these arrangements put together and then we can have a nice cup of tea and talk it over."

"Yes," Cordelia said, swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Tea would be lovely."

Chapter 14

Talking to the people at the pub hadn't done much for Victor's investigation, much to his dismay. According to the serving women and the bar man, the rumors of Arthur's affairs were just that. He'd never actually come to the pub with any young men that they'd seen, they'd only heard about it from people who said they'd seen it.

Victor was more than a little annoyed when he went back to his office. He hadn't expected the answer to leap out at him but he had hoped to find a little more to go on. There weren't many times he wished he was a detective but this was definitely one of them.

"Did you find what you needed, sir?" Bradley followed him into his office and Victor shook his head. "Maybe if you told me what you're looking for I'd be able to help a bit. I hear all sorts of gossip when I'm running errands for you."

"Perhaps later," Victor said. "There are a couple of things I want to check into first." Bradley nodded and pointed to his desk.

"There's an invoice there from a Mr. DuVerne for music lessons," he said. "I didn't know you were taking music lessons."

"It's not for me." Hanging his jacket up on the coat rack in the corner, he sighed. "Thank you, Bradley. Anything else?"

"Mrs. Traynor stopped by while you were at the pub. She was wanting to talk to you a little more about setting up that trust for her grandson you talked about."

"Did she say when she'd be back?" It struck him at last that he did still have other clients, all of whom felt they needed his help just as much as Cordelia, and he opened his drawer to pull out a folder of paperwork. He'd drawn up sample papers to show her the week before, though it seemed much longer than that.

"This afternoon."

"Excellent." Victor tapped the closed file folder. "Do you know if Edward is available? Or even in town at the moment?"

"Edward Godbee?" Bradley frowned. "Last I heard he was in Scotland taking a vacation after the last ridiculous thing you two had to get yourselves out of. The rumor is that he was trying to keep from

paying support to a lady he got pregnant.”

“That came out to nothing,” Victor said. “It turned out she wasn’t pregnant after all. She was trying to get money from him before people noticed her belly wasn’t growing.” The door to his office opened without a knock and both Victor and Bradley turned to it, expecting to see Miss Wright. Instead, a man in a police uniform that Victor didn’t recognize walked in. “Can I help you?”

“Good morning, Mr. Pembroke,” the man said. “My name is Arnold Christianson, I’m a police detective from Elston. I’d like you to come with me.”

“To Elston?”

“No, just down to the police station,” he said. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“You can ask them here,” Victor said, pointing to the door. “I’m rather busy at the moment as I’m sure you can understand, what with my client being murdered last night. Bradley, could you step outside for a few minutes? Tell Miss Wright I’m busy as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Bradley said with a nod. He closed the door after him and Victor looked up at the detective.

“Have a seat, Mr. Christianson. I’m happy to answer any questions you have.” He motioned to a chair in front of his desk but Mr. Christianson didn’t move.

“If you don’t come with me of your own accord, Mr. Pembroke, I’m going to be forced to place you under arrest.” He gave Victor a tight smile that didn’t convey even a hint of happiness. “You wouldn’t want your clients to see that, would you?”

“What are you talking about?” Victor looked at Mr. Christianson irritably over his desk. The detective came toward him and he stood up. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That’s for the court to decide,” the officer said. “Lady Whittemore admitted to having intimate relations with you at the time her husband was murdered. Do you deny that?”

“She did?” Victor’s mind raced. If Cordelia had already said it, there was no point in arguing it. If he tried to deny it, it would make both of them look worse. “All right, yes, we were together that night. That should prove to you that neither of us could have killed Arthur, unless you’re suggesting we did it in the middle of the act.”

“Maybe you didn’t do it yourself,” the officer said. “But Lady Whittemore is a very wealthy woman now that her husband is out of the way. It wouldn’t be unheard of for someone in your position to hire a man to do the murder so that you and she could be together afterward.” He gave Victor a knowing look. “Or was it her idea? I could always get in touch with your sister as well. She knows a bit about how miserable it is to be a divorced woman, the jury

would love that.”

“Leave my sister out of this!” Victor leaned over the desk at the officer, who smiled. He’d gotten a rise out of him and Victor immediately regretted it. “Get out of my office.”

“Oh, I’ll leave all right,” the detective said. “And you’re coming with me.” The door opened again and the chief of police came in, trailed by both Miss Wright and Bradley. “Chief,” Mr. Christianson said with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a feeling you would be here,” the chief said. “I’ve just been visited by General Richard Ellison and he was none too pleased with the way things are being handled. From what he told me you bullied his sister-in-law into confessing some rather private information mere hours after her husband was murdered.”

“I was trying to get to the truth of it,” the detective said. “You were the one who said he wanted things taken care of as quickly as possible.”

“I did and I do,” the chief said, folding his arms over his chest. “That doesn’t mean I want you to go round Greenley threatening our citizens.” He motioned to Victor. “Whatever you may think of what he and Lady Whittemore have been up to, it doesn’t give you the right to antagonize Mr. Pembroke. Save that for when and if a trial is necessary.”

“Which it won’t be,” Victor said, narrowing his eyes at both men. “I plan on proving to both of you that neither Lady Whittemore or I have done anything wrong, and finding out who killed Lord Whittemore besides.”

“Thank you for your enthusiasm, Mr. Pembroke,” the chief said. “I think we’ve got this under control.”

“Obviously not, if you’re resorting to threatening people,” Victor replied archly. The chief looked somewhat abashed, a rarity for him, but the detective continued to stare him down. “If that’s all, I’ll thank you to leave my office. I have clients to see.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Pembroke,” the chief said with a nod. “I would take it as a personal favor if you didn’t leave town while the investigation is going on.”

“The only place I’m going is out to the Whittemore estate to check on my client,” Victor said. “I have more than enough to worry about here without going all over England to find more.” He watched the two policemen leave, then sighed heavily and shook his head. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said to Bradley and Miss Wright. “I didn’t want to involve you in any of this.”

“It’s quite all right,” Miss Wright said, and Bradley nodded.

“Rather an exciting day, though.” He grinned at Victor, who gave him a look of disdain before taking his jacket off the rack and putting

it on. "Where are you going?"

"Out to the Whittemore estate as I said," Victor said. "Not only do I want to check on Lady Whittemore after that man interrogated her, I want to thank General Ellison if he's still out there. I assumed he'd gone back to Elston but I'm rather glad he hasn't."

"Yes, sir," Miss Wright said with a nod. "I'll be sure to inform anyone who comes by that you're out on business."

"Thank you." He watched the young lady depart, then picked up the folder he'd taken from the drawer and handed it to Bradley. "Here. I want you to take this to Mrs. Traynor. Tell her that I've had an unexpected emergency and that these are the papers for the trust. Have her go over them and write down any questions she might have, and I'll speak with her about it tomorrow. Do you think you'll be able to handle that?"

"Of course, sir." Bradley took the papers from him and thumbed through them. "Is there anything else I need to know about them?"

"Not at the moment," Victor replied. "Thank you for your assistance." He walked with Bradley to the door and held it open. "I'll likely be back in the afternoon. If not, please close up the office. Between you and Miss Wright you should be able to figure it out."

"I think so."

"Mr. Pembroke!" A booming voice caught Victor's attention as Bradley started off down the main street and he turned to see the General coming toward him. To someone who had wronged him, the General no doubt exuded an intimidating air but Victor had never been happier to see someone in his life. "I'm glad I caught you."

"As am I," Victor said, going down the steps to meet him. He extended a hand to the General, who shook it firmly. "I wanted to thank you, sir. The chief of police was in my office a moment ago and said you spoke on my behalf."

"On both you and Cordelia's behalf," the General corrected. "It may have been indiscreet of my wife but Birdie told me about your and Cordelia's, er, *situation* and I could only imagine how she must have felt being bullied by that man." He shook his head. "Some people can be so insensitive."

"Yes, well," Victor said. "I'm used to it."

"Whether you are or not, Cordelia isn't," the General said. "To be perfectly frank, I can't say I approve of the two of you going behind Arthur's back but I also can't say that I know the entire story. Birdie suggested there was more to it, so I'll reserve my judgment until then. However, I do care deeply for my sister-in-law and don't want to see her hurt any more than she has been. Can you at least promise me that much?"

"Absolutely," Victor said. "There is nothing in the world that could

make me harm Cordelia.” He hesitated, then decided a bit of the truth wouldn’t hurt. “I was working on going forward with a divorce for Arthur before he died, and doing my best to find a way to proceed that wouldn’t cause her undue stress. Cordelia has always been my first priority.”

“Good,” the General said. “She needs that at the moment.” He looked up at the sky. “It looks like rain. Would you care for a ride out to the estate? I presume that’s where you were going.”

“You would be correct,” Victor said. “I was planning on riding out there but if you’ve got a carriage waiting I certainly wouldn’t say no.”

“Excellent. Come on, then.” They walked together to the police station where the General’s carriage and horse were waiting and he pointed to it. “Just there. You know, I’ve seen a few automobiles round Elston lately.”

“Oh yes? I’ve yet to drive one but my friend Judge Perkins in London has one and it was quite fun to ride in.” The carriage driver got down to open the door for the two men and the General nodded at him. “I wonder if they’ll ever replace horses entirely.”

“Perhaps,” the General said as he climbed up into the carriage. “It will involve quite a bit of work to do it, though. Roads will have to be paved over or the damn things will get stuck in the mud, they’ll have to come up with some sort of station to put petrol in them. They’re quite the novelty now but it’ll be some time before they’re truly in the mainstream.”

“You’re probably right,” Victor said. His mind was already starting to wander. With Arthur gone, he wasn’t sure Cordelia would want to stay out at the manor. She might not want to stay at his house either. It wasn’t small but it likely wasn’t as lavish as she was accustomed to. It wasn’t that he didn’t have the money to get a larger house and more servants, he just never saw the point of hiring more for a single man.

“Are you planning on marrying her?”

“Excuse me?” Victor turned to the General in surprise. It was as if the man had read his mind and the General raised an eyebrow at him.

“Cordelia. Are you planning on marrying her now? It won’t be long before everyone in town knows about the two of you and there’s bound to be talk. She’s no doubt done a bit of harm to her reputation and as you bear some of the responsibility it’s only fitting for me to ask what your plans are regarding her.” It was clear from his words that the General was fully stepping into his role as Cordelia’s brother-in-law, and as strange as it felt to be asked these things straight out, he was grateful to the man.

“Of course I am,” Victor said, though he hadn’t given much thought to it up to that point. “I wouldn’t have gotten involved with her if I hadn’t.” It wasn’t the whole truth but it was close enough to

satisfy the General. Whatever he'd felt for Cordelia at the beginning was irrelevant now, though. All he cared about now was being with her, no matter what it took.

"Good," the General said. "Glad to hear it." Thunder rumbled overhead and he looked out at the sky. "I'm glad I keep my umbrella in the carriage for situations like this. That's another problem with those automobiles, half of them don't have a roof. What are you supposed to do when it rains if you're riding in something like that?"

"Good question," Victor said, sitting back against the seat with relief. It wasn't quite the man's blessing, but at least he knew the General was on his side. That was more than enough for the time being as far as Victor was concerned.

When they got out to the estate, Victor and the General shared the umbrella and hurried into the house through the rain. It had started raining halfway through the trip and by the time they got up the driveway it was pouring. Birdie and Cordelia met them in the foyer as the General shook off the umbrella and folded it up.

"It's really coming down out there," he said as one of the staff came to take the wet umbrella from him. "I didn't think it would be quite so bad." He went to Birdie and kissed her on the cheek. "Good thing I offered Mr. Pembroke a ride out here or he'd be soaked to the bone."

"Thank you for coming, Victor," Cordelia said, taking his hands. He wanted to kiss her the same way the General had kissed his wife but felt somehow it would be a step too far, especially with both of the Ellisons' eyes on him. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you about speaking to the police."

"It's all right," Victor said. "I honestly didn't expect them to start threatening you right away." He squeezed her hands. "I'm sorry to have put you in this position, my dear." Without warning, Cordelia put her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

"I'm glad you did," she said. "Otherwise they might really have arrested me."

"Let's go into the sitting room," Birdie said. "Otherwise we'll all catch our deaths." For being the younger sister, Birdie seemed to have no problem taking charge of a situation and they all followed her to the sitting room where one of the housemen was putting logs into the fireplace. "I took the liberty of asking them to light a fire. It's so chilly in here when it rains."

"Since you're all here, I suppose there's something I should tell you," Cordelia said, letting go of Victor and looking at him. "You already know, of course, but I should probably explain it to Birdie and Richard as well so they don't think too badly of me."

"I could never think badly of you," Birdie said, taking her sister's

hand and twining her fingers through it. "But I am interested in hearing whatever it is you have to say. You did promise me you'd explain it to me and I've been ever so patient." Something in her voice made Cordelia laugh and it warmed Victor's heart. He did want her to be happy, more than anything. The women he had been with before hadn't mattered to him, hadn't gotten into his heart the way Cordelia had, and she was so different from them it was as if she was a different species. He'd wanted to possess her and gotten his wish, now all he had to do was hold onto her.

When they were all in the sitting room, Cordelia sat in one of the wing-backed chairs and Victor sat in the one beside her automatically. Birdie sat on the loveseat with her husband and Cordelia cleared her throat as she watched the houseman light the fire. It really was a bit chilly in the house but warmed up quickly with the fire. As soon as he was gone, she looked to Victor, who nodded.

"After Arthur and I were married a few months, he suggested we sleep in separate rooms," Cordelia said, looking down into her hands. "He said he needed a firmer bed than the one we shared so I took the one we had and put it in the room I have now. We weren't being intimate with one another so I didn't think much of it when he suggested I sleep in the other room, but I confess that I felt a bit slighted. He was distant with me and seemed to only show affection when someone else was around.

"I was wondering what exactly was wrong with me and went to ask him why he'd turned on me as soon as we married, determined to get an answer out of him. That was the first time I walked in on him with another man."

"Another *man*?" Birdie gasped and put a hand over her mouth. "You mean, he was---"

"Yes," Cordelia said, holding up a hand. "I prefer not to go into detail if that's all right with you. He told me that his father had pressured him into getting married and producing an heir to the fortune, and that we only had to stay married until Lord Whittemore died."

"At which point he would divorce her as I said," Victor added. "Unfortunately, his father had written a provision into the will that would force them to remain married or Arthur would lose everything, and if he was to be ruined so would Cordelia. If he could find a way to divorce her, which was what I was working on, then he had promised to take care of her until she found another husband."

"I spoke to Victor about it after I caught Arthur in the house with another man again after he promised me he would keep his lovers out of the house, and he told me everything that had been going on." Her cheeks filled with color and Victor thought he'd never seen anything

so beautiful. "I'd started having feelings for Victor before that, but once I knew he was trying to protect me it only grew stronger." She reached for him and he took her hand, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Birdie smiling approvingly.

"Did anyone else see any of this?" The General looked closely at Cordelia. "I believe you of course, my dear, but if this goes to court you're going to want a witness."

"Yes," she replied. "My lady's maid, Patricia. In fact, she's the one who brought it to my attention that he was having an affair while I was right downstairs. She's a very sweet girl, very honest and dependable. She was also with me when I discovered his body."

"If all this was going on, it seems obvious to me that one of Arthur's lovers may have had something to do with the murder," the General said. "I'm sure it's crossed your mind as well. Have either of you mentioned this to the police?"

"I haven't," Victor said. "I didn't want to do so without evidence, or without Cordelia's consent. It didn't seem my place to do so."

"Nor have I," Cordelia said. "Somehow I feel as if I'd be dishonoring Arthur's memory. I know that sounds a bit silly but it's how I feel. Not only that, I don't want people to blame me for his indiscretions. It's made me feel a bit like a bad wife."

"You're not a bad wife!" Birdie jumped up from her seat and went to hug her sister. "Poor Delia, you've been through so much."

"Thank you, darling," Cordelia said. "It means a lot to hear you say that." She turned to the General. "Thank you too, Richard. I know this is a lot for you to hear all at once. Thank you as well for talking to the police. I'm so glad you married my sister."

"Think nothing of it, my dear," he said. "If there's one thing I won't stand for, it's someone bullying a lady, especially a new widow."

"Speaking of Ladies and widows," Birdie said, looking at Victor. "Does Delia still keep her title? And will she inherit Arthur's estate?"

"Seeing as how she and Arthur were still married at the time of his death, and that Arthur's will specifies her as the sole beneficiary, I should say she does. It will still have to go through the proper channels but once the police finish their investigation and clear her of any wrongdoing Cordelia should inherit everything." He smiled. "In spite of everything, he did keep his promise to take care of you."

"What if I don't want it?"

"It's yours to do as you see fit with," Victor said with a shrug. "Put it in trust for your children if you like, or donate it all to charity. Whatever you wish. You don't have to decide right now, you have plenty of time to think it over."

"I don't know about you," the General said, "but I'm quite

hungry.”

“As am I,” Cordelia said. “Lunch should be ready soon. I’m not sure what’s on the menu but I did take the liberty of telling the cook that we’d have four for lunch.” Birdie grinned brightly and her face turned red.

“Perhaps five,” she said, and immediately all eyes were on her. “I was going to tell you all after the party but then everything went crazy. Now seemed like a good a time as any, though. We could all use some good news.”

“A baby? Birdie, that’s wonderful news!” Cordelia jumped up and hugged her sister tightly while Victor shook hands with the General, who looked stunned by his wife’s words.

“Good work, General,” Victor said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” the General said, then went to his wife. She looked up at him and he put his arms around her, pulling her close. “Nothing could make me happier, my dear. The way you care for Walter with such love makes me certain you’ll be a fine mother. I simply cannot wait to grow our family with you.”

“Let’s give them some privacy,” Victor said, touching Cordelia’s arm. She nodded and followed him into the hallway. As soon as the door was closed, she turned to Victor.

“I’m sure they’re going to want to go back to Elston now,” Cordelia said. “To give the family the good news.”

“How many children does the General have?”

“Just one. A boy from his previous wife.” She smiled. “It took him a little while to get used to Birdie because she’s so young but she’s really grown on him. She’s had her challenges but she’s been an excellent mother.” Cordelia sighed. “I hope I’m able to be as good a mother someday.”

“I’m sure you will be,” Victor said, pulling her close. “Someday. If they go back to Elston, will you be all right staying here by yourself?”

“I don’t know,” Cordelia said. “This place was always too big, even with Arthur here, but now it feels like it’s haunted.” She leaned against Victor’s chest and he tightened his arms around her. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to stay here with me?”

“Aren’t you worried about what people will think of you?” For his part, Victor could care less what people thought of him. People had been saying things behind his back for years. He didn’t want to make things harder for Cordelia, though. She smiled up at him.

“I’m sure the police already have people thinking I murdered Arthur for his money. How much worse could people think of me?” The door opened behind them and the Ellisons came out, the General’s arm around Birdie’s waist. It looked like Birdie had been crying but her face was shining with happiness. Victor hoped he could one day

see Cordelia like that.

“Well,” the General said with a grin. “Any word on lunch?”

Chapter 15

In spite of the shadow of the investigation hanging over Cordelia's head, Arthur's funeral went ahead as planned. Word of his indiscretions hadn't gotten around to society circles the way it had been whispered in the pubs, so there were quite a few people around his grave when his casket was lowered into the earth.

If anyone thought it was unusual that Cordelia wasn't crying much, they didn't remark on it. She stood like a statue beside the grave, thanking people for their condolences and letting them clasp her hand before they walked away. The entire time, all she could think about was when it would be over so she could go home and work on her music. Maurice had been surprised that she wanted to keep their appointment for her next lesson but he'd agreed all the same, telling her that music would take her mind off her sadness.

Victor had been spending the night with her at the Whittemore estate so she wouldn't feel quite so uneasy, and while no one was talking about Arthur's affairs Cordelia had heard more than one person whisper about her as she passed in Greenley.

She knew that it was almost as improper to be seen out of her house while she was in mourning as it was to have a single man staying in the estate with her, but because Birdie and the General were also in residence the gossip was somewhat reduced. They were set to return to Elston after the funeral, though, so the talk would surely begin in earnest once they did.

"It was a lovely funeral," the last mourner, an older woman in a very old-fashioned black dress, was saying to Cordelia with a smile as she shook her head. "Poor Arthur. Have the police found anything out yet?"

"Not yet," Cordelia said. "I'm sure they'll inform me when they do." She looked up and saw Victor talking to Birdie and the General, then turned back to the older woman.

"If you need anything at all, please let me know." She patted Cordelia's hand, then went in the direction of the church where her carriage was no doubt located. Cordelia watched her go, then joined

Victor and her family.

"I'm glad that's over," Cordelia said, brushing aside the black veil that covered her face. "Is everything all right? You all look so serious."

"It's a funeral," Victor said. "We're supposed to look serious." He had been very careful not to show any affection toward Cordelia in public. As far as the majority of people in town knew, the rumors about her and Victor were just rumors. Even when they were trying to ruin someone's reputation, the police knew better than to spread information about a grieving widow and an attorney.

"We were just telling Victor that we need to be going back home," Birdie said, and Cordelia was pleased to hear that she was using his first name. "Walter will be giving Miss Carroll fits by now and I want to give him the good news."

"Of course," Cordelia said warmly. "I'm just grateful you stayed as long as you did."

"I wanted to stay until Mrs. Richmond was better," Birdie said, a hint of sadness in her voice. "She's getting good care, though, so I suppose I shouldn't complain."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Cordelia said with a smile. "In fact, I was planning to check on her while I'm in town. She's stronger than most women her age."

"She's a tough old bird, that's for certain," the General said. "I have no doubt she'll live to see our child come into the world."

"Of course she will," Birdie said. "She'd never pass up the chance to tell me exactly how a lady would give birth." This made both sisters laugh and Cordelia hugged her little sister.

"Take care, Birdie. I hope you'll visit me while you're still able."

"Nothing's going to keep me away from my big sister," Birdie said. She put a hand in front of her abdomen with a grin. "I'll be out to here and still coming to hear you play piano. They say music is very good for babies." She linked arms with Cordelia and they walked to her carriage. The clothes they'd bought while they were staying in town were neatly packed in a trunk that was strapped to the rear, and the driver got down to open the door. The General helped his wife into the cab before getting in himself, and the driver closed the door. Birdie scooted closer to the window and leaned out. "Bye, Delia!"

"Goodbye, darling," Cordelia said as the driver snapped the reins and the carriage began to move forward. Birdie leaned out the window and waved to her until they were at the end of the lane, then pulled herself back inside. Cordelia watched until the carriage turned a corner and was gone, then turned to Victor.

"We should get you back to the estate," he said, taking her gloved hands. "I know it'll be a bit lonely without your sister and the General but you shouldn't be seen around town too much while you're in

mourning.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Cordelia said. “My husband was having affairs all over town and I’m expected to keep myself closed in the house for a year, and wear these dreadful black dresses besides.” She sighed heavily. “I suppose I should at least keep up appearances until the investigation is finished. I can worry about what society thinks of me after that.” Victor rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs.

“It’s overrated,” he said. “At least in my case.” He nodded toward Cordelia’s carriage, which had a large, ornate coat of arms painted on the side. “Let’s be on our way, shall we?”

“Just a moment,” Cordelia said. “Before we go back out to the estate, can we check on Mrs. Richmond? I’d like to see how she’s doing.”

“Of course,” Victor said. He motioned for her driver to come off the carriage to open the door. “The doctor isn’t far from here. We can be there in just a few minutes.”

“I would prefer to walk, if you don’t mind.” The sky was gray but it didn’t look like rain, and Cordelia’s driver stopped where he was. Victor shrugged and the driver climbed back onto the carriage to wait for further instructions. “I’m surprised you’re not arguing with me.”

“There’s no point,” Victor said. “I’d never win.”

They walked a respectable distance apart into town, Cordelia slightly behind Victor with her head bowed. She refused to put the veil back over her face but she didn’t want people finding reasons to talk about her poorly just yet. It would come, she knew it would, but she’d made her choice and was going to have to live with it.

The doctor’s office was a small building near the police station and Cordelia avoided the eyes of the police as she walked up the steps. They hadn’t come to bother her since she’d admitted being with Victor, and as far as she knew they hadn’t bothered him either. It made her nervous.

“Lady Whittemore,” the doctor said, hurrying over as soon as he saw her. “Thank goodness you’re here. I was just trying to decide what I should do.”

“About what?” A cold knot formed in her stomach as she looked at him, then looked over her shoulder at Victor. He stepped closer to her and put a hand on her shoulder. Cordelia knew how it looked, but she didn’t care. *Not Mrs. Richmond. It can’t be.*

“Your Mrs. Richmond was doing so much better that I mentioned to her that she could return to the estate soon. She apparently took that to mean that she could leave whenever she liked.” He shook his head. “I came back from seeing Mr. Halford about his pneumonia and she was gone. Told the nurse I said she could leave.”

“That sounds like her,” Cordelia said with a sigh. “But where did

she go? Do you know?"

"I'm afraid not," the doctor said. "She told the nurse she had some unfinished business to attend to before she went back to the estate but she didn't say where." Cordelia looked at Victor, who was rubbing his temples.

"I have a feeling I know where she may have gone," he said, then looked up at the doctor. "Thank you for your time, sir."

"You're quite welcome," the doctor said. "I would like to recheck her in about a week if that's all right," he said to Cordelia. "I imagine you'll have better luck talking her into that than I would. Also, here's some medication." He took a small amber bottle out of his pocket. "This is in case she has another episode."

"What is it?" Cordelia looked at the tiny pills in the bottle and the doctor smiled.

"It's called tri-nitrin. If she has chest pains or starts acting lightheaded, have her put one of them under her tongue. If she needs more, she can always get some here." He handed the bottle to Cordelia. "It's very safe."

"Thank you, doctor." Cordelia slipped the bottle into her pocketbook. "I'll be sure and give them to her when I see her. She doesn't listen to me any better than she'll listen to you but I'm sure she'll take these if she needs them." She looked at Victor. "Where is it you think she's off to?"

"Follow me," Victor sighed. He led her out the door and to the police station, where he held the door for her. As soon as he opened it she could hear Mrs. Richmond's voice, sharp as ever.

"No call to keep the staff up all night," she said, anger plain in her voice. "Absolutely no call. It was rude, not to mention you frightened quite a lot of people." They rounded the corner to find Mrs. Richmond standing in front of the police chief. She was leaning on a cane, a new addition for her, but had her finger in the chief's face. It was something Cordelia had seen plenty of times as a child and she looked at Victor.

"How did you know?"

"She passed out while she was telling off one of the officers in the servants' quarters," Victor said, hands on his hips. "From what you and your sister have told me, I gathered her unfinished business was probably with the police."

"Mrs. Richmond," Cordelia said, trying not to laugh. "What are you doing, you scared me half to death disappearing from the doctor's." The old woman turned to her, frowning.

"Cordelia, what are you doing here?"

"Collecting you, it seems." She looked at the police chief, who was studying her warily. "Thank you for your time, sir. We'll be getting

out of your way now.” She held an arm out to Mrs. Richmond for her to lean on, and her longtime companion gave her a withering look.

“I can walk on my own.” She stumped past Cordelia with her cane, giving the police chief a look that clearly said she wasn’t finished with him. “Are we going back out to the estate? I’m sure there’s a lot to be taken care of. Are Bridget and General Ellison still here?”

“They left just after the funeral this morning,” Cordelia said gently. “They didn’t know when you’d be ready to leave the doctor’s.”

“That’s a shame,” Mrs. Richmond said, and she sounded as if she really meant it. Cordelia wasn’t sure if she should be the one to tell their former governess about her sister’s pregnancy but she was spared having to make the decision when Mrs. Richmond looked at Victor. “May I ask why you’re walking around town in your mourning clothes with a single man?”

“A lot has happened,” Cordelia said, her cheeks burning. There was no doubt about it, Mrs. Richmond was feeling fine. “I’ll explain it to you when we get back out to the estate.”

“You most certainly will not,” Mrs. Richmond said, stopping in her tracks. “You’ll explain it now, or I shan’t take another step.” Cordelia’s face grew redder as she felt the police officers staring at her, and she lowered her voice.

“Mrs. Richmond, please---“

“Would you care to come to my office?” Victor interrupted her smoothly, and Cordelia could feel the charm coming off him. Not for the first time, she wondered how he was in court. “It’s a bit more private and my assistant can make you some tea while we chat.” Mrs. Richmond sized him up with narrowed eyes and Cordelia held her breath, hoping she would agree.

“All right,” she said, and Cordelia was awash with relief until Mrs. Richmond turned her critical eye on her. “This had better be exceptionally good, Cordelia.” The officers were still watching them and Cordelia tried to laugh good-naturedly as she led Mrs. Richmond out of the station.

Once they were in Victor’s office, she sat on the chair across from his desk and sighed. She somehow looked smaller to Cordelia than she had when she was a girl, and more frail in spite of her performance in the police station. Bradley brought her a cup of tea and she took a polite sip before setting it on Victor’s desk.

“Well,” she said, looking between Victor and Cordelia. “You said you’d explain what’s going on here. Let’s hear it.”

“The long and short of it is that the police have accused both myself and Cordelia of murdering Arthur,” Victor said, leaning on his desk. “After speaking with the General and Mrs. Ellison, the four of us have concluded that it was likely one of Arthur’s lovers that killed him

but we have no idea of knowing which one.”

“Which *one*?” Mrs. Richmond looked scandalized beyond anything Cordelia had ever seen. Even seeing her walking around town as indiscreetly as she was with Victor paled in comparison to what she had just been told. “Do you mean to tell me he was having affairs while you were in the house?”

“Yes,” Cordelia said, looking at Victor for support. He motioned for her to continue and she opened her pocketbook and took out the vial of pills the doctor had given her. “Here. The doctor gave me these. If your chest starts hurting, put one under your tongue.” She handed them to Mrs. Richmond who gave her a suspicious look.

“Why would I need these right now?”

“Because Arthur wasn’t having affairs with other women,” Cordelia said. She took a deep breath. “He was having affairs with men.”

“With *men*?” As expected, the color drained from Mrs. Richmond’s face. She looked to Victor for confirmation and he nodded. “For how long?”

“Since before we were married,” Cordelia said. “I caught him at it and he made me promise not to tell anyone. In fact, I caught him at it just a few days before he was murdered. From what Victor had heard in the pubs, he had quite a few lovers so we don’t know who it could have been.”

“Is that so, Victor?” The way she said Victor’s name was dangerous and Cordelia knew he could hear it too. Rather than back down the way Cordelia always had and Birdie never did, he simply turned on more charm.

“I’m afraid so. Though I’m certain you suspected something was going on,” he said. “You don’t strike me as the type to let anything in the manor slip past you.”

“It did seem that something wasn’t right,” Mrs. Richmond said, a satisfied tone in her voice. “The spark I saw between General Ellison and Bridget wasn’t out of the ordinary but it was quite different from what I saw between the two of you.” She shook her head. “You should have had the marriage annulled. Now you’re a widow. That’s going to make things much more difficult when it comes to getting remarried.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Victor said, almost lazily. “I know a gentleman who would consider it a great honor to marry Cordelia.” He looked at her, his blue eyes serious above his rakish smirk. “If she would have him, that is.” When the meaning of his words hit her, Cordelia put a hand over her mouth. She didn’t know what to say. Nothing seemed appropriate, but she was saved from having to come up with something by Mrs. Richmond, who frowned.

“Yes, quite.” She didn’t seem to have heard what Victor had said and Cordelia leaned down into her line of sight.

“Is something the matter?”

“So that young man at the manor,” she said, still frowning, “he must have been one of the lovers you spoke of?” Cordelia looked at her curiously and she curled her hands around her cane. “I saw a young man at the manor the day Cordelia and Lord Whittemore argued and she went down to Greenley in a terrible temper. I assumed he was a friend of Lord Whittemore when I saw him at the party as well. It seemed odd that he was leaving right at the beginning of the party.”

“At the beginning?” Victor frowned. “There was a young man who almost knocked me down the stairs when I was on my way in. He seemed in a hurry to leave.”

“That had to have been him,” Cordelia said. “Do either of you remember what he looked like?” She looked from Mrs. Richmond to Victor.

“Vaguely,” Victor said. “Slender, with sort of dark blonde hair.”

“I believe he had a birthmark,” Mrs. Richmond said. “Just below his eye. I remember thinking its placement was rather unfortunate. It made him look very feminine.”

“I don’t remember that much,” Victor said with a sigh. He shook his head. “Damn. This is going nowhere.” Cordelia went to him and put a hand on his arm.

“We’ve got more to go on now,” she said gently. “The police will have to believe us. As much as I didn’t wish to bring Arthur’s preferences into the public eye, it seems it’s the only way to keep the both of us out of jail.” With a smile, Victor put a hand on her waist lightly and pulled her closer. It felt good to be near him again and if it hadn’t been for a small, disapproving sound from Mrs. Richmond behind her it would have been perfect.

“Please remember where you are, Cordelia,” she said coolly, and as tiring as it was to have Mrs. Richmond constantly reminding her that she was being improper, it was good to hear her sounding like her old self. “You are also supposed to be in mourning.”

“Excuse me,” a soft voice said from the door. “Mr. Pembroke?”

“Yes, Miss Wright?” He took his hand off Cordelia’s hip. The door swung open and a pretty young woman with dark blonde curls looked in. She was slender and looked as if she could be upper-class, if she hadn’t been working in an attorney’s office.

“A telegram was just delivered for you from a Judge Perkins in London.” She stepped into the room and held out the letter to him. Victor took it and nodded.

“Thank you. Where’s Bradley?”

“I believe he went down to the bakery,” Miss Wright said. “He said something about wanting to get a certain kind of biscuit they were

only selling today and that he would be right back.” She looked around the room. “I’m sorry to disturb you. I’ll leave you to your meeting.”

“One moment, young lady.” Mrs. Richmond was frowning at the girl and Cordelia wasn’t sure if it was because she disapproved of her working for a single man, or one of the hundreds of other reasons the old woman could find to be critical. She came closer to Miss Wright, leaning on her cane. “You look very familiar to me.”

“Do I?” Miss Wright looked confused. “I don’t believe we’ve met before today.”

“Have you a sister? Or perhaps a brother?”

“As a matter of fact I do have a brother,” Miss Wright said with a nod. “He’s my twin brother, actually. Ten minutes younger than me.” Mrs. Richmond got even closer and the younger woman looked uncomfortable. “Why?”

“You have a birthmark,” Mrs. Richmond said. “Right under your eye. Does your brother have one as well? I know sometimes fraternal twins don’t look as similar as identical ones.”

“He does.” Now Miss Wright sounded cautious, and Cordelia looked at the girl as well. They weren’t the same but if she put aside their gender, she could certainly see that Miss Wright looked very much like the young man she had walked in on with Arthur during their last argument. “Why are you asking? Has Samuel done something wrong?”

“Why would you ask that?” Victor’s tone was conversational but Cordelia could hear there was a deliberateness to it. He obviously didn’t want to frighten the girl away from talking to them but they needed the information. “Has he been in trouble before?”

“Yes,” Miss Wright said, sounding defeated. “He’s always getting in trouble. I took this job to help support Mother during her illness but I’ve ended up supporting him as well. He loses money gambling, he gets into fights in bars, and every time there’s a fine to be paid it mostly comes out of my pocket.” She sighed. “I feel obligated because he’s my brother but there’s a limit to what I can do for him. What has he done this time?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Victor said. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t mention this discussion to him, though. I may need to speak to him and I don’t want him coming in here with his mind made up.” Miss Wright nodded.

“Of course, Mr. Pembroke.” She left the office and closed the door, and Victor sighed.

“This just gets better and better.”

“Come along, Mrs. Richmond,” Cordelia said, helping the old woman to her feet. “That’s quite enough excitement for your first day

out of the doctor's."

"I quite honestly think I've had enough excitement to last me the rest of my life," she muttered. "Take me home, Cordelia. I'd like to sleep in my own room tonight." She cut her eyes toward Victor. "I suppose you're coming along with us?"

"I have some things I need to take care of here," he said, shaking his head. "This could get extremely ugly and I want to make sure everyone, including Miss Wright, is protected as best I can. I'll be along this evening." He looked at Mrs. Richmond. "If that's all right."

"Just so long as you're discreet about it," she said, not looking at him as she made her way across the room with her cane. Cordelia trailed after her just in case she looked like she might fall but the old woman moved more quickly than she had expected. "Honestly, Cordelia, all the time I spent raising you, you'd think you'd have learned by now how to act like a lady." She continued to nag as Cordelia looked back at Victor helplessly. He shrugged, looking like he was about to start laughing, then sat down at his desk and opened the envelope Miss Wright had given him.

"Our carriage is at the church," Cordelia said. "I'll go ahead and have the driver bring it over so you don't have to walk."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs. Richmond said as Bradley came through the front door. "Young man!" Her tone of voice suggested that he was in trouble and Bradley looked guiltily at her. "Our carriage is waiting at the church, run along over there and have him come get us. It won't do to have us walk all the way over there."

"Yes ma'am," Bradley said with a nod. He put the wrapped package in his hands on Miss Wright's desk and hurried back out the door.

"You see, Cordelia? That's how you handle these matters. You're a widow in mourning, you shouldn't even be out of the house without an escort." Cordelia opened her mouth and Mrs. Richmond shook her head. "Your Mr. Pembroke does not count. It's as if you're Bridget, trying to drive me to an early grave."

"Yes ma'am," Cordelia said absently. Since becoming an adult Cordelia had learned the best way to deal with Mrs. Richmond was to be as polite as possible and pay as little attention as she could get away with.

While Mrs. Richmond gave Cordelia a lecture on exactly how she should behave as a widow, Cordelia's mind wandered. When Victor held her she could feel the strength in his arms and it made her happy. It had always felt like there was a wall between her and Arthur, even when they'd first met, and she had just assumed that was what being married was supposed to be like. Now that she had fallen in love with Victor, she knew that *this* was what it was supposed to be

like. She wasn't sure if Victor had been serious when he was talking about marriage or just trying to placate Mrs. Richmond, and there was no way for her to ask if he meant it until she saw him later. The odds that they would get to be alone together were slim with Mrs. Richmond back in the house but Cordelia supposed she would just have to get creative.

I suppose I am getting to be a bit more like Birdie, she thought as she nodded in what she hoped was the right place. *That's not altogether a bad thing, I don't think.*

Chapter 16

The next morning Victor woke up not in the Whittemore estate as he had every morning since Arthur was killed, but in his own house. In spite of their repeated promises that they would sleep in separate rooms, Mrs. Richmond had put her foot down and told Victor to go home. Not wanting to get off on the wrong foot with her, he'd kissed Cordelia and promised to see her the next evening.

It was a strange thing, caring what someone else thought of him so much. As Cordelia said, however, it didn't seem like the old woman would be going anywhere anytime soon and the last thing he needed was for her to fight tooth and nail against their relationship. He'd never had such concerns before, and part of him lamented the knowledge that his life was never going to be the same. On the other hand, he would have Cordelia.

He was still thinking this over when he walked into his office and hung his jacket on the coat rack. Bradley came in with a cup of tea and a small plate of biscuits, and Victor raised his eyebrow as Bradley set them both in front of him.

"What on Earth is this?"

"Those biscuits I bought yesterday for Lady Whittemore's grandmother," he said. "She left before she had any and I didn't want them to go to waste."

"She's not Cordelia's grandmother," Victor said, picking up one of the biscuits. It had a light purple frosting with a candied violet on the top. "Good work, Bradley. You've discovered the single most girlish biscuit in all of England."

"I was buying them for women," Bradley said, nettled. "I didn't expect us to have to eat them." Behind him, the door opened and Cordelia came through. She was wearing a different black dress today and Victor was already looking forward to seeing her in something more vibrant. Perhaps he would buy her something striking in red. Her sister had looked lovely in the color, no doubt Cordelia would look even more beautiful.

"Perfect timing, my darling," Victor said, standing up with a grin.

“Do you like candied violets?”

“Well yes,” Cordelia said, looking a little confused. “They’re quite nice. Why do you ask?” Victor held the plate out to her and she blinked at it. “Is that one of Thonberry’s biscuits?”

“As a matter of fact it is,” Bradley said, giving Victor a meaningful look. “Do you like them, Lady Whittemore? I bought several.”

“I’ve never had one,” Cordelia said. “I was never able to send someone in time to get them before they were sold out. I’d love to try one.” She took one of the biscuits off the plate and took a small bite. “They’re wonderful,” she said with a smile. “The lavender really comes through. I don’t wish to be rude, but may I have some tea to go with them?”

“Of course,” Bradley said with a smile. “I’ll get you a fresh cup.” He left the office and Victor came around the desk to kiss Cordelia. She smiled at him brightly.

“Any news?”

“Not just yet,” Victor said. “I’ve set a meeting with the chief of police for this afternoon to discuss the case further and tell him what we’ve learned about Miss Wright’s brother’s involvement. I wanted to talk with you before I did, though. I wanted to make sure you were all right with me revealing Arthur’s affairs to the police first.” He sighed. “As much as I don’t want to admit it, there are certain people who will look at you in a different light.”

“I’m sure there are,” Cordelia said. “I don’t care. Arthur made his bed, if it tarnishes his memory that’s not my problem. I’m finished with trying to cover things up. In fact, I had a great row with Mrs. Richmond this morning about you.”

“Really?” Victor looked at her, surprised. “Who won?” Rather than reply, Cordelia gestured to the black dress she was wearing. Victor roared with laughter and swept her into his arms. “Don’t worry, my love. Before you know it, you’ll be back to wearing any and every color I can afford for you.”

“Do you think there’s enough evidence to arrest him? Or bring him for questioning? I really don’t know how police investigations work,” admitted Cordelia.

“It helps that there’s more than one person who can put him at the estate around the time of Arthur’s death and in the days beforehand. That should be good enough evidence to start with, and they can question him from there.” Victor shrugged. “I’m afraid your word alone wouldn’t be good enough since they still somewhat suspect you.”

“Patricia can back me up,” Cordelia said. “She was the one who saw them together first and came and told me before I confronted him. And both you and Mrs. Richmond saw him leaving the party at

the beginning, which would have been right about the time the murder occurred.” She sighed. “She may not want to, but your Miss Wright can tell them that he was late to help her take care of their mother.”

“Even if he doesn’t confess, that’s a lot of evidence against him,” Victor said. “A jury will take one look at it and find him guilty.” He looked at Cordelia. “Since you’re going to be clear of any sort of charges, you’re going to be a very wealthy woman.”

“I don’t care,” Cordelia said. “Not really. All I care about is that this is over and we can put it behind us.” She looked up at Victor. “You still want me?”

“Of course I do.” Smiling, Victor pulled her close. “I’m not sure I’m interested in living out in the woods, though.”

“I’m not either, to be honest,” Cordelia said. “I always felt so lonely out there.”

“What would you say if we visited London once this is all over? Perhaps we could find a place there that’s more like what we’re looking for?” He brushed her cheek with his thumb and she blushed brightly, just the same way she had when they’d first met.

“Between this and what you were saying yesterday about marriage, you’re going to fill my head up with all sort of ideas,” Cordelia said with a smile. Victor took her face in his hands and smiled, then leaned down to kiss her. He’d barely pressed his lips to hers when shouting from his waiting room made them both look up.

“Wait here,” he said, rushing through the office door and into the hall. Cordelia caught up with him in just a few moments and Victor shot her a look of annoyance. “Cordelia, I thought I told you to stay in my office.”

“I’m not going to---“

“Nobody move!” There was a gunshot from the waiting room and Victor stopped and put an arm in front of Cordelia. Her eyes were wide with alarm and Victor put his finger to his lips and started walking quietly toward the waiting room with her behind him, both of them doing their best to keep silent. He knew there was no way to convince her to go back to the safety of his office and he didn’t want to waste time if someone had been injured.

When they reached the end of the hall, Victor could see the young man he had seen at the manor the night of the party standing in the middle of the waiting room with Miss Wright. His arm was locked around her, holding her in place, and there was a small pistol in his hand. The young secretary was crying and her brother looked around wildly.

“Please, Sam, don’t do this,” Miss Wright said through her tears. “This is crazy.”

“Shut up!” His eyes searched the room and found another client, then Bradley with his hands up, and finally Victor and Cordelia. “You’re the one I’m looking for,” he said, pointing his gun at Cordelia. “It’s your fault this all happened!”

“What?” Cordelia started to step forward and Victor’s arm stiffened in front of her in an attempt to hold her back. She stopped but Victor knew he couldn’t keep her back for much longer. “What are you talking about?”

“If it wasn’t for you, we could have been together,” Samuel said, throwing his sister aside and advancing on Cordelia. “Arthur said the reason we couldn’t be together was because he had to stay married to you or lose his fortune. I needed that money! Our mother needed that money to live but he wouldn’t give it to me. He said he couldn’t do anything while you two were still married.”

“You killed him for that?”

“I was going to kill *you*,” Samuel shouted. “Then we could have been together! Everything would have been fine if it wasn’t for you. I was going to hide in your room and kill you after the party but he found me first.” He frowned and rubbed his head. “Everything’s kind of hazy after that but when I came back to myself I was back in town cleaning myself up in a room over the pub.” While he was talking, his gun arm had lowered slightly and Cordelia glanced at Victor for just a moment. He nodded and let her step forward, hands raised in front of her.

“You didn’t mean to do it,” she said calmly. “I see that now. Things just got a bit out of control. I’m sure if you explain that to the police---“

“We’re not bringing them into this!” Samuel’s hand jerked up and he pointed the gun at her. “You’re going to give me the money he wouldn’t, and then I’m getting as far away from this town as I can.” Cordelia kept walking toward him. “If not, I’m going to kill you like I should have done before.”

“All right,” Cordelia said. “Tell me how much money you want and I’ll get it for you. You’ll have to wait here while I go get it, though. They won’t like it if you come into the bank waving around a gun and asking for money.” She was maddeningly calm but it didn’t seem to be working.

“Then I’ll go with you,” he said. “I’m not giving you a chance to run away.” Tears were streaming down his face. “If he hadn’t been trying to protect you he would be alive right now.”

“Listen,” Cordelia began gently, but he shook his head and leveled the gun at her. His hands were shaking and he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt.

“No! I’m finished listening to you!”

“Samuel---“

It happened almost too quickly for Victor to realize what had happened. One minute there was a gun pointed at Cordelia's head, then there was a crash and the air was filled with the rich aroma of coffee. The gun fell out of Samuel's hand as he stumbled forward, shouting as the hot coffee soaked into his shirt. Victor leapt forward and grabbed the gun off the floor while Bradley stood over the young man holding the handle of the now-broken coffeepot.

“Good work, Bradley,” Victor said in surprise. “I'll never say a word against your brewing coffee again. You can have all of it you like.”

“That was very quick thinking,” Cordelia said as Miss Wright knelt on the floor beside her brother. Victor could see burns on the sides of his neck and the part of his chest he could see through his shirt and he pointed at Samuel.

“Go get the police and the doctor,” Victor said. “I think it's safe to say we need both.”

“Yes, sir.” Grinning, Bradley disappeared through the door and Victor stood over Samuel, shaking his head.

“I'm sorry,” he said to Miss Wright. “I'm sorry you had to see this.”

“What's going to happen to him?” She looked up at Victor, and he wasn't surprised to see tears in her eyes as well. “He's done a horrible thing but he's still my brother.”

“It's hard to say,” Victor said. “He planned a murder but ended up killing his lover instead, and I believe him when he said he didn't intend to.” Cordelia came over to him, shaking her head. “Are you all right, darling?”

“I'm fine,” she said with a smile. “I'm glad it's over.”

“Not quite,” Victor said as the door opened again and the doctor came in. He knelt down beside Samuel and Miss Wright, opening his black bag just as the police chief and the detective came in. “But I'm sure those two gentlemen would like to apologize to you.”

“What happened here?” The police chief looked around the office at the broken glass, spilled coffee, and Samuel sitting up with blood running down the back of his neck while the doctor looked into his eyes. “Mr. Pembroke, is this one of your clients?”

“He's my secretary's brother,” Victor said, motioning to Miss Wright. “And the man who killed Lord Arthur Whittemore. He admitted as much before Bradley incapacitated him, and we have multiple witnesses who will put him at the manor both the night of the murder and earlier.” He looked at Christianson. “I hope you'll forgive us for doing all your work for you.” The detective gave Victor the coldest look he'd ever seen and he smiled patronizingly. “Don't worry, I'm sure you'll make yourself look decent for your higher-ups

when you go back to Elston.”

“I think you’re going to be fine,” the doctor said. “I’ll need to dress those burns but I can do that at the police station.” The chief of police nodded and grabbed Samuel by the arm, hauling him off the floor. “I’ll go with you.”

“Mr. Pembroke, Lady Whittemore,” the chief said. “Would you meet us at the station with the witnesses you spoke of?”

“Of course,” Victor said. “We’ll have to fetch them from the Whittemore estate.”

“You should do it as soon as possible,” the chief said, glancing at Samuel. “I want this taken care of by the end of the day.”

“You aren’t the only one, sir.” Cordelia turned to Victor. “I shall fetch my pocketbook from your office, then we can take my carriage to the estate.” He nodded and she started back down the hall while he went over to Bradley and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Can’t believe you thought of that,” he said with a smile as Samuel was led away out of the office. “If I might make a suggestion, Bradley?”

“Yes sir?”

“Go to law school. You’re being wasted here as my assistant and it’s that kind of on-your-feet thinking and resourcefulness that a good attorney needs. Your father might not think you’re smart enough, but I have faith in you.”

“But I like being your assistant,” Bradley said. “Who’s going to get your mail and go buy biscuits for your clients? I don’t want you to get along poorly without me around.”

“I’m touched.” He looked toward his office and smiled. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be around, to be honest. It depends on whether Cordelia wants to stay here or not.” There was the sound of a door closing and he leaned closer to Bradley. “Don’t mention just yet, though.”

“Of course not, sir.”

“I’m ready,” Cordelia said. “My carriage should be waiting outside. We can fetch Mrs. Richmond and Patricia and be back directly.”

“Let’s go then.” Victor offered her his arm and she looked at it hesitantly. For a moment he thought she was going to decline his offer on the grounds of propriety but she smiled and took his arm with a smile of her own.

“Yes, let’s.”

Victor led her out to her carriage and opened the door before her driver could get there. He helped Cordelia into the cab, then climbed up himself and closed the door. The driver climbed up onto the boards and got the horse moving while Cordelia and Victor sat face to face. Victor took her hands and looked closely at her.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes," Cordelia said, squeezing his hands. "A bit shaken up, I'll admit. I've never even seen a gun, much less had one pointed at me. There were a couple of moments I really thought he might kill me. I knew you wouldn't let him do that, though."

"I would have thrown myself in front of a bullet for you without hesitation," Victor said. "Without you, my life wouldn't be worth living." He got up so he could sit beside her. "Before you, I thought of women as little more than pretty playthings. I never wanted someone with a mind of her own, or bravery like you showed this afternoon."

"I didn't know I had it in me until I met you," she said with a smile. "I've always been the good daughter, the one who didn't want to speak out of turn or harm my family's reputation. I suppose that's part of why I agreed to keep quiet about Arthur. Not wanting to shame my family or how it might reflect on me to others."

"I came to Greenley with a reputation and I had no intention of trying to repair it. That may make things a bit difficult for you if you want to stay here but I swear I'll never give you reason to doubt me, Cordelia." He reached up and cupped the side of her face in his palm. She smiled and leaned against it. "I love you."

"How different it sounds when you say it," she said, her eyes shining with tears. "I love you too, Victor." She leaned forward and put her arms around his neck, and he pulled her into a kiss. It was every bit as passionate as the ones they shared on their nights spent in each others' arms, but Victor doubted that there was enough time for much else before they got to the estate.

"Come on," he said, smirking as he moved to the opposite side of the cab. "We should at least pretend to be proper while your Mrs. Richmond will be watching."

"You're right," Cordelia said, grinning as brightly as he'd seen her sister do. "The last thing we need is for her to have heart palpitations before we get to the police station."

"I'm more worried about what she might do to us," he replied. "Especially now that she has that cane. You saw how she talked to the police, I can only imagine what she might do to you and me." Cordelia laughed and he sat back against the cushions. "Have you ever ridden in an automobile?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Is it enjoyable? I've heard it can be quite dangerous."

"Not if you're with someone who knows what they're doing. I'd like to take you to London sometime. Maybe show you around a bit and take you for a ride in one. It'll be a long time before Greenley even gets roads that would lend themselves to automobiles." He sighed. "There's quite a lot of modern life we're missing

being out here.”

“I’d love to go to London,” Cordelia said. “To be honest, living out here in the woods was never really that appealing to me. It was beautiful at first but I grew lonely rather quickly. I wouldn’t even mind staying a while in London.”

“That settles it,” Victor said. “After all this is over, we’ll go to London. I’m going to buy you the most beautiful dress you’ve ever seen and to hell with those mourning clothes. You never should have had to wear them in the first place.”

“Oh darling, thank you!” Cordelia hugged him tightly and Victor kissed her on the cheek, then pointed out the window.

“Is that Mrs. Richmond?”

“What?” Cordelia sat up, a guilty look on her face, and Victor grinned at her. He couldn’t wait to spend the rest of his life with this woman, and as far as he was concerned it couldn’t start soon enough. He reached out and took her hand, then kissed the back of it.

“Only joking, my love.”

“I’m not speaking to you any longer.”

“Of course you will,” Victor said. “You just need the proper motivation.” He pulled her over onto his lap and kissed her. *To hell with being proper*, he thought. *I’d rather be in love.*

My Enemy My Earl

A Laird to Love Book 1

USA Today Bestselling Author Tammy Andresen

Chapter 1

Lord Ewan McDougal took a deep breath of Scottish air as he trotted down the rutted road toward Kirkcaldy. It was so good to be back in his home country. Even with the misting rain, the fresh smell of spring flowers lifted his spirits. With any luck, he'd never step foot on soil that wasn't Scottish again.

He doubted he'd ever have need to traipse over Europe or Asia after the war, so there was no real danger there, but England was another matter entirely. A Scot could get sucked onto English land despite his best intentions not to. And he had no intention of ever touching that country again.

Or any of its people, for that matter.

"Do ye think we'll be able to stop soon? I'm peckish." Kieran McKenna grumbled next to him.

Ewan glared at his longtime companion and friend. They'd grown up together on neighboring parcels of land, had been drafted together, and had returned changed together. Kieran was like his tartan, he was rarely seen without the other man. "We just ate."

"Aye, but it's raining." Kieran looked as though his point ought to have been obvious.

"So what?" Ewan gave him a look of bewilderment. "It's Scotland. It's always raining."

"After years of being cold and hungry, I've no tolerance for either." Kieran shrugged.

It was difficult to argue with that. There were a lot of things he had no tolerance for after years of war. Loud noises near stole his sanity. He couldn't stand the English, for example, who'd drafted him in the first place. And his ruined land, bare after five years of neglect. That drove him mad but at least his land he could repair. That was why he needed to get to Kirkcaldy. From there it was a short ride to third cousin, Hamish McDougal's castle. "You know I've got a bride to meet."

"Will she marry someone else if it takes an extra day?" Kieran wagged his eyebrows. "Besides, you know you're devilish handsome."

She'll likely fall right into yer arms."

Kieran wasn't wrong. Women had long given him attention. Though Kieran was the more classically handsome man with his straight nose and piercing eyes, Ewan had always had a masculine look to which women responded. "It's not that. You ken as well as anyone my land is in shambles. I need to marry to put it back together. Winter is comin'."

"It's only spring." Kieran winked. "But I know ye be wantin' a lovely little Scottish lass with a nice full...dowry."

Ewan tried not to growl at his friend's crass words. Although they were at least partly true. Fiona, his perspective bride, did come with a dowry and that coin would be verra helpful in repairing his lands. Fiona was a strong Scot woman, which would also come in handy.

They'd last seen each other ten years before, when she was but a child. She'd had a penchant for practical jokes, which had near driven him mad, but surely she'd grown out of that by now.

Up ahead he spotted a carriage stopped and tilting precariously to one side. The driver was down on his knees in the muck attempting to repair the wheel. Poor sod.

Next to him stood a hooded figure with flowing skirts that had been sucked into the muck. He grimaced. The side of the road was no place for any lass to be. Especially not on a day like this.

"I'm all for helpin' women in need but it's rainin' harder still. We should keep movin'." Kieran frowned more deeply. "Ye're not going to stop are ye?"

The question did not dignify an answer. Dismounting, he led his horse toward the stranded travelers. As a soldier, he'd learned it was less intimidating when he approached on foot. Especially considering his height and the breadth of his shoulders. He frightened on horseback.

The driver looked up with a wary eye but Ewan offered him a smile. "Is it help ye be needin'?"

"Aye, that'd be right nice." The driver nodded.

"You can go back in the carriage if ye like, lass." Ewan gave her what he hoped was an sympathetic smile but he heard her huff her breath almost like it annoyed her that he'd said it.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll stay," she answered from under the hood, annoyance lacing her lilting voice.

Never mind that he admired a woman with enough pluck to stand out in the rain to fix a wheel. Something Kieran wasn't willing to do,

apparently. Or that she stayed even when she didn't have to.

Her accent was English.

"Dinna trouble yerself, lass." The driver reached out to pat her like a child.

Ewan nodded his agreement. "I know an English woman like yerself doesn't do this kind of thing normally."

"How would you know what I can or can't do?"

He could just see her mouth below the edge of the hood. Perfect, full pink lips turned down into a frown.

Why had he thought words like *perfect* and *full* when he should be thinking ones like *conniving* and *wretched*? Wasn't that what all the English were? Everyone he'd met when abroad at war certainly had been. Pushing the Scots to the front of the line to die in droves.

He was tempted to climb on his horse and keep riding. Kieran would be happy, anyway. Because he was not here to help the English. "An English miss fixing a wheel?"

He heard her hiss of breath. "Why not?"

Because the English are arrogant and entitled while still managing to be useless, because...

He knew he must be glaring at that remark and so, instead of answering, he turned away and looked at the wheel. The driver had a few broken spokes.

"I don't dare drive on a road this rutted with the wheel compromised and I always keep some extras. But I can't quite get them in. Lady Clarissa was attempting to help me, which was greatly appreciated, but we're not strong enough, the two of us. Your arms might just do the trick." The driver gave him a wink.

"Brawny men are good for something, I suppose," she mumbled in her haughty English accent that managed to make his strength and size sound like a detriment. His frown deepened. Worse than the insult, she was a lady. An unmarried one at that. He'd have to be careful not to give his own title or risk being hunted.

English ladies were always after unmarried titles. I didn't seem to matter whether the man was honorable, rich, or kind, as long as he was titled.

He wasn't just given to making false claims. It had actually been his experience. The ladies of London hadn't paid him a lick of attention, well not that kind of attention, until he'd been awarded a title for his service. Then he'd been relentlessly pursued by young misses and their mamas. It had been an eye-opening experience that had made his ache for his own country even greater.

"What is wrong with brawny men? Ye seem to be needin' one right about now." He knew it didn't matter what she thought, but something about this woman was getting under his skin. He knelt

down and the spokes popped easily into place. From this vantage point, he could see more of her face. Creamy skin and a pert little nose peeked out from under the hood.

"They are often dim-witted and miraculously full of themselves," she huffed.

He stood, now covered in a fair bit of mud himself. He was used to women blushing and smiling at him. Complimenting his strength, not insulting it. He brushed his dark, overlong hair behind his ears and looked at the English lass. "And English misses often think they ken everythin' about everythin'. You don't ken a thing about me."

Part of him wanted to tell her he was an Earl as well as a decorated war hero. She should be falling at his feet not frowning at him. But he gave himself a mental shake. He didn't care what this woman thought of him.

She, in turn, stared fixedly at him. Though the hood covered them, he could feel her eyes on him and it made his insides tighten in the strangest way. Near nervous or excited. When was the last time a woman had affected him so?

"I know your type, can't even take the time to shave your face or lace your shirt," she bit back, her hand coming to her hip. It parted the opening of her cape and revealed part of her rather luscious bosom. He sucked in his breath.

He should get on his horse and go. But, if he were honest, she was damn interesting. Like a sharp-tongued beautiful fairy or a...he stopped his train of thought. What the bloody hell was he thinking?

The door popped open and a pretty, petite blond stuck her head out. She was a curvy woman who would make some man happy, but her face still held the innocence of a lass, not acquainted with the world. In a single look, he liked her immensely. She gave him a sweet smile then turned to the lady. "Did they fix it, Clarissa?"

Slowly, delicate hands rose to the rim of the hood. Brushing back the folds, her deep, glossy, dark brown tresses tumbled in a loose coif down her back.

Large grey-blue eyes looked at him with a vulnerability that near made him ache in places he'd thought long dead. Her expression was in stark contrast to her hissing words. As were her pink cheeks and plump sweet lips, which seem to tremble slightly as though she were nervous or afraid. Likely she was only cold, but some part of him wanted to shield her from whatever made them shake.

"They did." Her voice was like honey, smooth and sweet unlike when she'd spoken to him.

His eyes locked with hers. That was how the English trapped a Scot. Pretty and seemingly harmless, a man didn't even see them stealing his future 'til it was too late.



Clarissa assessed the Scottish brute in front of her. She didn't like him. Not even a little. It didn't matter that he had brawny muscles and piercing green eyes. Or that he stopped to help stranded travelers.

First, there was the fact that he'd insulted her English roots. She wouldn't even bother to tell him she was half Scot. Then there was the careless way his shirt was untied at the top, his overlong dark hair, his casual stance with one hand slung low on his hip to accentuate how much smaller they were than his broad chest. His red tartan exposed his knees in an altogether indecent way. His face had a rugged set, with his Roman nose and prominent cheekbones. Men that handsome were always up to no good. Past experience had taught her this and it was a lesson she wouldn't soon forget.

His strong jaw flexed as he gave her an assessing look. His interest was written all over his face. As if she'd needed more proof that he was a rake. She'd learn to spot the type anywhere, and now that she knew them, she vowed to stay far, far away.

But she supposed some measure of gratitude was in order. Trying to keep her disdain out of her voice, she mumbled, "Thank you for helping us, sir." She gave a small curtsy and then started shaking out her skirt in an attempt to remove some of the mud before climbing back into the carriage. Fortunately, their exchange was nearly over.

"Ye're welcome," he answered in a deep rich brogue before stepping closer.

Without another word he reached for her skirt and she straightened, stiffening from shock. He wasn't going to...he wouldn't dare...but he did. He knelt down beside her and grabbed her skirt, and holding it out, began deftly removing the mud. "Sir," she gasped.

"It's Ewan. Ewan McDougal. Now turn." His gruff words weren't frightening. But her breathing was coming out in short gasps. The heat from his body had her own growing warmer. He started working on a new section of gown.

She stared at him unable to believe this was actually happening. As he spun her again, her foot hit a rut in the road and she bobbed, just a little. His hand shot out to her hip to steady her. An ache deep inside her throbbed at his touch. She gasped, her hands coming to his shoulders to right the now-tilting world. But that only made it worse. They were broad and muscular and for moment, she had the feeling they could shield her from the world. "Please stop," she begged.

"It's raining, ye ken?" He looked up at her as though she were dull in the mind.

"I am aware." She tried to straighten her shoulders but the rain was worsening and they hunched back down without permission, curled closer to him and the warmth he exuded.

"Then turn around so that I can git the back." He gave her skirt a little tug to turn her.

Huffing, she turned, his brisk words bringing her to her senses. Agnes stared at her openmouthed as he worked off the mud. Fortunately, no one else was here to see this, though she hardly had any reputation left to preserve, so it wouldn't really have mattered.

Looking down, she had to admit he had done an admirable job of removing the muck. She would be warmer for it on this last leg of the journey. "Thank you," she murmured over her shoulder. Only a rake would touch her so but at least she would be more comfortable for his efforts.

He stood and nodded. "Get yerself in that carriage now before ye catch yer death. Scotland is a lot colder than ye're likely used to."

How did he make that sound like an insult? Not that it mattered, it didn't a wit. She'd likely never see him again, and good riddance. "How could you possibly know what I am used to?"

Without another word, she climbed into the carriage and snapped the door shut.

"Who was that?" Agnes bounced a little on her seat. Agnes was her cousin from her father's side and her travelling companion on this journey along with Agnes's mother, Mrs. Judith Faulkenberry. Her parents would have accompanied her but she hadn't wanted them to. Closing her eyes, she pushed angry thoughts of them away. She'd be with her Scottish relatives soon, and Agnes and Aunt Judith were the best possible company.

Her father's sister was a proper English lady from her perfectly coiffed grey hair to her never-wrinkled gown. Agnes' enthusiasm wore her out. Though her cousin was about to turn eighteen, she flitted like a butterfly everywhere she went.

Aunt Judith had used the time while they were fixing the wheel and not bouncing about, to take a short rest. But Agnes's enthusiasm had roused the woman. "Do stop, dear," she mumbled to Agnes.

Clarissa rolled her eyes, trying to exude a casualness she didn't feel. "I don't know, some Scot." She didn't want them to know that the man's touch had sent her world tilting wildly.

"You should have seen him brushing off her skirts, Mother. And his name was Ewan," she imitated his deep voice. "Ewan McDougal." Then she tapped her chin. "Say, you don't think he's related to your mother, do you?"

“Probably. Some distant cousin. But there are likely a thousand of them.” She waved her hand, brushing the unpleasant thought away that she might have to see him again. Because she never wanted to see those broad shoulders and green eyes as long as she lived.

“He brushed your skirts?” her aunt repeated, sitting straighter in her seat.

“He was being a gentleman, Mother. Helping with the mud.” Agnes nodded.

Clarissa didn’t respond but she thought it was unlikely to have been an act of chivalry. More probably he was just exercising his rakish ways touching her like that.

She shook her skirts out around her to aid in their drying. “We’re likely never to see him again so let us not dwell on it. He did manage to fix the wheel so we’ll be out of this carriage—”

“And into a drafty old castle—” Aunt Judith huffed.

“In no time.” Clarissa finished.

“Do you think it’s haunted?” Agnes clapped looking excited. They’d spent most of their time in the country so Agnes was constantly seeking adventure.

“Why would you even ask that?” Aunt Judith sniffed. She straightened her already smooth skirt.

But Clarissa held back a grin. Agnes’s enthusiasm and zest had carried her through the past month and she loved her cousin for it. It wasn’t the ideal temperament for a lady of London, but as a friend, it was divine.

“We’ll ask Fiona, Emilia, and Ainsley.” Clarissa smiled. “I bet they’ll help us hunt.”

“Clarissa, don’t encourage her.” Aunt Judith crossed her arms.

“How fun.” Agnes gave her a winning grin that lit her face in the most beautiful way. Already an attractive girl, she radiated happiness.

Clarissa was looking forward to visiting her mother’s family too. But not for ghost hunts. This place had always been her safe haven, her cousins were people with whom she could be herself. She needed that now.

Leaning her head against the frame of the carriage, she glanced through the shutters. The carriage lurched forward, finally moving again. She could see the brawny Scot, Ewan McDougal, riding alongside the other man, who had stayed on horseback. He looked devilishly good. Another reason to despise rakes. Their handsome charm masked a devious heart.

Chapter 2

“Those were some bonnie lasses.” Kieran grinned over at him.

He grimaced. They had been indeed, which was not a fact to which he should have been paying attention. He disliked all things English, even pretty ladies. “I’m sure you made a right fair impression by staying on your horse. We’re Scot and we come to the aid of those in need, unlike our southerly neighbors.” He gave Kieran a scathing look. “And they’re not even lasses. They’re English.”

“All young women are lasses, in my opinion. And therefore fair game when we’re admiring pretty faces.” Kieran winked at him. “You noticed too. Don’t deny it. I saw ye brushin’ off the one’s skirts. Right bonnie lass that one.”

“I was not admiring her pretty face.” He absolutely had been. Try as he might not to notice what a bonnie lass she was, he had done just that. “I did like her pluck though. Trying to help fix the wheel in the rain. Could almost mistake her for a Scottish lass, doin’ something like that.”

“You’re lyin’. I saw ye lookin’ at her.” Kieran gave him a broad grin.

“Ye were behind me. How could ye have seen me lookin’?”

“Yer head never moved. Trained right at her.” Kieran gave a loud chuckle.

“What do ye know anyway?” Ewan huffed. “I’m going to meet my bride.”

“Ye’re goin’ to meet a prospective bride. There is a big difference. Don’t be confusin’ the two.” Kieran wagged his finger. “This is why you brought me. Help you keep your head. If Fiona McDougal isn’t right for you, you keep lookin’.”

Ewan sighed. Kieran was right. But if Kieran was tired in body after the war, wanting to be tucked in an ale house, Ewan was tired in spirit. He wanted to be settled with some pretty lass and make babies and farm his land.

Not that he’d ever had a problem with female attention. But he didn’t want just a pretty face or a woman looking for a title because

his land required real work. He needed a woman with pluck.

The thought stopped him dead because he'd just thought that about that English lass, Lady Clarissa. And she wasn't at all what he was looking for. Well, if she were Scottish, she'd be exactly what he was looking for. But she wasn't and so he wasn't interested at all. Not even though she was beautiful, and spoke her mind, and stood up for herself.

He didn't answer as they came up to a roadside inn. He'd likely have ridden on past but Kieran seemed determined to make this journey as long as possible. So they tied their horses to the hitching post and stepped inside.

They were ushered to a private salon. It was warm with a crackling fire and a window overlooking the street.

When Kieran ordered a scotch, Ewan gave him a sharp look. "If we pushed we could make it to Castle Ravenscraig by tonight."

Kieran scrunched up his face. "We've only a few hours left on the journey, I asked the innkeeper." Kieran scratched the three days' worth of growth on the chin. "We can make the last part of the journey tomorrow."

"If it's only a few hours we can set out as soon as the rain slows—"

"Don't get your knickers twisted." Kieran chuckled.

"I don't wear knickers, in case ye hadn't noticed." Ewan scowled.

"I just like the sayin'." Kieran leaned toward him. "You look like shite, and you should clean yerself up if ye want to make a good impression."

Ewan's frown deepened. Is that what she'd meant about his face and his shirt? He looked down and realized he might look rather like a highwayman instead of a lord. Kieran had a point, much as he hated to admit it. If he were meeting a bride, he should look the part. He'd stay.

A movement out the window caught his eye. Lady Clarissa's carriage rumbled past.

He'd stay the night, clean himself up before he went on. But as he watched the carriage roll out of sight, a vision of chocolate brown hair cascading around him ravaged his thoughts. He had to put that English lass out his mind and focus on his plan to marry a proper Scottish bride.



Her breath caught when Clarissa saw his horse tied out at the inn, and then she frowned.

Agnes noticed too. "Oh, there is our rescuer." She patted her hair with her hands putting invisible strands back into place. "So dashing and handsome. Wasn't he handsome, Clarissa?"

She kept her eyes trained out the window. "I hadn't noticed." She'd more than noticed. Just the thought of him made her pulse race. But a man who was so obviously devilish must be avoided at all costs.

"Now the other one...Mama, you wouldn't believe it. He just stayed on his horse. Didn't do a thing to help." Agnes sniffed. "Ne'er do well, if you ask me."

Clarissa turned then. "And you thought Mr. McDougal wasn't?"

"He rescued us." Agnes tipped her head to the side, assessing Clarissa.

She turned her eyes back to the road. "He changed a spoke on a wheel. He didn't pluck one of us from a runaway horse." She gave an exasperated sigh. "Everything from his scruffy beard to his too-proud stance to the way he brushed off my skirt spoke of a man who is anything but a gentleman."

Agnes was quiet for a moment and then said, "Well, he *was* looking at you rather intently."

"Oh dear." Aunt Judith finally spoke, looking slightly distraught. "Let's discuss something else. We're likely never to see either man again." With that she tilted her head back for another rest.

Silence was fine with Clarissa. She leaned back on her seat as well. By tonight she'd be safely tucked in at her uncle's castle, all four of her cousins clustered around her. She didn't know how long she'd stay but she had no plans to return to London anytime in the near future. Agnes would not come out to society for almost a year and even then, Clarissa could stay in Scotland if she chose.

The carriage rumbled on for several more hours, and Clarissa drifted into a restless sleep until the carriage came to a stop.

Peeking out the window, her Uncle Haggis's castle loomed before her. A smile split her face at the sight. To her, this was coming home.

Sweeping into the large entry, Clarissa grinned as she took in the ancient tapestries and the stonework. This was home. Agnes and Aunt Judith were just behind her and she could hear them gasp at the sights.

Uncle Haggis was the first to make an appearance. "Ye made it." His voice boomed, echoing off the stone walls.

"I made it," she breathed, rushing forward to give him a hug.

Soon her Aunt Rhona and cousins, Fiona, Emilia, and Ainsley, were hustling in from varied activities to greet them.

"You're finally here," Fiona beamed grabbing her hands and pulling her arms out to her sides to assess how she looked. "You don't look too damaged by those Sassenach." Funny, early this morning she'd been accused of being a Sassenach, though Ewan McDougal had had the decency to just call her *English*.

"Are you going to tell us what happened?" Ainsley, the youngest sister asked. She was always stirring up trouble in a way Clarissa loved. Except for when Ainsley was asking pointed questions about the most humiliating moment of Clarissa's life.

"Of course she isn't," Emilia gave her a wink. "Not until she's ready." She was the quietest of the three and often the most sensible. In this moment, Clarissa loved her for it.

Happiness washed through her as all four of her cousins hugged her at once. Then she reached back and took Agnes's hand. "This is my other cousin, Agnes. You're going to adore her." And she pulled Agnes into the embrace.

"How darling," Aunt Judith gushed behind them. "Haggis, lovely to see you again."

"Aye, ye too, Judith. It's been a long time." He walked over to embrace her. Aunt Judith's face pinched in disapproval but Uncle Haggis paid it no mind. Clarissa tried to hide her own smile. She adored her Scottish family's more casual use of affection. Always had. She'd often wondered how her mother had survived a marriage with a stiff English lord. But her mother was affectionate enough for both of them, she supposed.

"How is my sister?" Uncle Haggis boomed, pulling Clarissa away from her cousins into his own embrace.

Their affection was like a balm, soothing away her heart's aches. His barrel chest a safe haven as she hugged him back. It was as though some of the pieces of her heart fit back together. "She is well, sorry she couldn't join us."

"Taking care of your father, I suppose." Uncle Haggis's voice held a note of disapproval. It mirrored Clarissa's own feeling, but that was absurd. He was her father, after all.

Aunt Rhona clucked her tongue. "Let me hug the child." She pushed past Uncle Haggis. "And don't you start in on her father already."

"It's a fine mess he's landed her in, don't think I don't know it."

"Uncle Haggis, could we not speak of it, please? I'm..." She paused, taking a breath, "I'm not ready."

"Fine," he bellowed again. "Get yourself settled and fed and then we'll celebrate tonight before the arrival of the rest of our guests."

“Guests? What guests?” she asked, a sort of tingling starting in the pit of her stomach. She didn’t want to see anyone other than her family. That she was sure of.

“Fiona has a suitor.” Ainsley gave an impish grin. “An Earl from Dumfries. He was in the English army and got a title because of his bravery.” The younger girl danced a jig. “Doesn’t it sound romantic?”

Clarissa’s stomach nearly dropped. She was going to watch her cousin be courted? Of course, Fiona was at the age, just like herself, but she’d hoped to see no men, other than Uncle Haggis, on this trip. Perhaps forever.

Fiona scrunched up her face. “What is romantic about war? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Ainsley only danced faster. “She’s met him before and they didn’t get on very well—”

“We were children.” Fiona’s hands shot to her hips, bright red patches forming on her cheeks.

“When...when does he arrive?” She hid her hands in the folds of her skirt to hide the fists that had formed.

“Tomorrow, if the weather held on the journey,” Emilia responded quietly. Always demure her tone was soothing. But her eyes studied Clarissa intently. Clarissa tried to relax the lines of her face.

Giving them a weak smile, she said, “My trunks must have been brought up. My dress got atrociously muddy, I’ll just see to it.”

She hurried up the stairs but not before she heard Ainsely say, “Poor thing.”

Agnes agreed. “It really is terrible.”

They weren’t wrong. Being humiliated in front of all of society by a known rake truly was awful.

Chapter 3

The next morning Clarissa stood in a sitting room, just off the main entry, dressed in her finest wool gown, awaiting the arrival of the Earl from Dumfries. It wasn't that she cared to impress, it was required of the occasion. She hadn't asked anything else about him and her cousins hadn't offered any more detail. Thankfully. So she sat silently waiting for the exact type of event she had been hoping to avoid coming to Scotland—socializing with eligible men.

She wasn't the only one who stoically waited. Normally, Fiona was the fearless leader of the group. Not only did she love adventure but her favorite pastime was pranks of any kind. She drove Clarissa mad at times, but she loved her like a sister. Her eldest cousin was unusually quiet today, so Ainsley took advantage of the silence to regale them with tales of runaway sheep and handsome boys from the village who saved them. At fifteen, Ainsley had discovered the virtues of the male species.

Clarissa remained silent, though a piece of her desperately wanted to warn the girl about the heartache men almost always brought. Especially the handsome ones.

Two figures appeared down the long drive and Fiona shot to her feet, her skin growing paler under her freckles. "I don't want to do this," she mumbled.

Clarissa reached out her hand and Fiona took it. Uncle Haggis's voice boomed from the hall. "The gaggle of women currently in the sitting room needs to join me on the front steps."

Fiona and Clarissa were last to leave the sanctuary of the sitting room. Her aunts had followed Uncle Haggis out onto the drive. Still holding hands, she and Fiona stepped onto the wide stone steps. Uncle Haggis gestured for them to move so that they all stood in a line of greeting.

Taking a deep breath, Clarissa closed her eyes. She needn't be nervous, it wasn't her fate that was in question now, but her heart ached for her cousin. Meeting a man whom she might spend the rest of her life with. It was almost absurd, really.

When her eyes fluttered open, she looked first at Fiona, whose skin had turned a putrid shade of white, then to the riders.

Green eyes penetrated into her from atop his horse. Ewan McDougal. His hair was still devilishly long, but his face was now clean-shaven. Her stomach flipped in the most curious sensation, which she told herself was dread.

Her eyes flicked to his companion. He must be the earl. No wonder he hadn't gotten down from his horse to help. Now she would be stuck in this castle with those broad shoulders and rakish hips and... She forced herself to stop. She disliked everything about this man.

She'd have to warn Fiona about the type of rake her earl kept company with.

Stopping just short of the steps, they handed off their reins to a groom. "It's a pleasure to see you again," Uncle Haggis called.

"And you as well." Ewan gave a warm grin. The kind that made her insides twist again. "This is Captain Kieran McKenna, Laird of McKenna."

Clarissa scrunched her face in confusion; he hadn't said that Laird McKenna was an earl? How curious because...

"Lord Dumfries, you remember my daughter, Miss Fiona McDougal, Maid of Ravenscraig."

Her confusion vanished in a haze of anger. He was the earl, though he hadn't introduced himself as Lord Dumfries. Instead, he'd given his common name. Probably misleading her for nefarious reasons. The same ones that had caused him to stare at her so intently and touch her in such a familiar way. All the while he was travelling to court her cousin. Ewan McDougal was a first-rate lout.



Ewan watched her face turn several shades of pink as her uncertainty disappeared and open hostility took its place.

It had also taken him by surprise to find the little English pixie he'd spent the night dreaming about here at Ravenscraig Castle. Haggis' sister had married some English lord. She was likely the product of that union.

But try as he might, he could not ascertain what he might have done or said to offend her so because she looked near livid.

He knew why he disliked her. English and haughty, with her nose currently in the air, she was nothing like the Scottish lass he hoped to

marry.

“My Lord,” Fiona dipped into a bow and his eyes flitted over to the woman to whom he should be paying attention. She was exactly what he’d been telling himself he wanted and the lass looked just as he remembered her. Flying red hair blowing in the ocean breeze, despite obvious attempts to tame it, topped her freckled face. She was lovely and there was a kindness about her features that was pleasing to a man’s soul. Ewan should welcome her into his home and his life, but as he bowed, his gaze was drawn to Clarissa, sparkling in the morning sun next to her. His insides tightened dangerously.

In a beautiful pale pink wool gown, he could see her perfect hourglass shape, petite yet curvy in all the right places. Her glossy hair even brighter and her face somehow more vulnerable in her indignation at his identity.

Haggis McDougal continued the introductions. When he reached Lady Clarissa, she held up her hand. “We’ve met.” Her reply was short, dripping with open disdain.

“Did ye now?” Haggis’s bushy eyebrows rose to his hairline. “Where would that be?”

Ewan cleared his throat. “Their carriage was in need of repair on the road to Kirkcaldy. I stopped to aid them.”

Ewan would have thought that Haggis’s eyebrows couldn’t rise any higher but then one of them did. It scanned Clarissa’s rigid face and then swung back to Ewan. “Ye fixed their carriage?”

“Yes,” Ewan shrugged as he spoke, his hands coming up. She clearly didn’t like him, although he could not understand why. He found her damn interesting, that is to say, he would have found her to be interesting if she weren’t English.

Ushering everyone inside, Haggis led them to another drawing room. Ewan looked back to see Clarissa and Fiona clasping hands as they walked. He closed his eyes for a second. Somehow that seemed to be an omen of bad luck to come. While he hadn’t done a thing to either of them, he had the suspicion they were conspiring against him. He’d likely made this trip for nothing.

Once again he could blame the blasted English.

Taking a breath, Ewan tried to focus. Entering the drawing room, everyone began taking seats and Clarissa and Fiona sat together, leaving no room for anyone else.

He chose a seat across from them both, attempting to focus on Fiona. He’d ask her a question. Women liked that. Though admittedly, his skills in wooing women had dwindled significantly in the past ten years. “How have ye fared?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Since last I saw you?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.” He sensed trouble brewing. He should have

practiced before arriving. Spending all his time with soldiers, he'd forgotten how to talk with fair maids.

"Well, good, poor, happy, sad....it has been nearly half me life since I saw ye last." Her tone dripped with sarcasm.

Clarissa hid a smile behind her gloved hand, clearly celebrating her cousin's victory. He clenched his jaw. They *were* in league against him. Lady Clarissa was likely at the heart of it.

"And you, Lord Dumfries?" A teasing smile played on Fiona's lips. It was the same one she wore when she'd put frogs in his bed when she'd visited as a child. He knew to be wary of that smile.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "Of the ten years since we met, I spent eight of them in service to the British Armed forces and the last two at war in India. So I have had less, *well* and *happy* and a lot more *poor* and *sad*."

The smile disappeared, embarrassment creasing her brow. "Of course, Lord Dumfries. Forgive my inconsiderate question."

He gave a terse nod, but already he felt like a heel for saying such things. This was going all wrong.

Ainsley bounced in her seat, her excitement palpable. "What was it like, being on the battlefield?"

Kieran spared him answering, thank the saints. "Mostly wet and cold when it wasn't scorching hot. Dreadful business."

Smartly, Kieran had left out, terrifying and maddeningly grotesque. Kieran had been correct yesterday. Ewan needed his friend here.

Agnes gave him a curious look. "Is that why you didn't help us with our wheel? You don't like being wet anymore?"

Ewan bit back the smile at Kieran's red cheeks. His friend's normally strong jaw tucked into his chest in embarrassment. Ewan wasn't the only one floundering now. There was nothing like a pretty little miss to make a man remember what was important in life.

"Agnes," her mother chastised from the other side of the room.

But Agnes turned to Ewan, beaming at him. "Thank you again, my Lord, for your help."

Ewan gave a nod of acceptance, "Ye're welcome." He returned her smile, glad to have at least one female ally. His shoulders relaxed by some small measure.

Two servants entered carrying trays of tea and cakes. Kieran jumped up gleefully. How that man stayed so trim, he had no idea. He nearly sighed with relief, eating meant a break from this conversation.

As tea was poured, he found himself glancing at Clarissa once again. She caught him staring and he nearly cursed allowed. He was going to make a fool of himself even more than he already had. He'd have to ask her something now. "Lady Clarissa," he cleared his throat, "what brings you to Scotland?" He needed a reminder that she was

English. He hated the English. They talked of a unified country but mostly they used the Scots and their resources for English gain. He was here for a Scottish bride, not another English trouncing.

A moment of horror, then anger, followed by shame, crossed her terribly expressive face. Every emotion played out on her features. "I...uh...I wanted to visit my family." She answered quietly, all the fire gone from her voice. He'd clearly struck a chord because she'd been nothing but haughty since they'd met.

What caused her so much distress? "I understand that. I missed me land and family more than I can say while I was gone."

She gave a nod and relief clearly made her relax. What didn't she want to discuss?

Kieran swallowed a giant bite of cake. "I thought everyone who was anyone in England went to London for the season?"

And just like that she tensed again. Every muscle tightened and her face pinched as though she was in pain as she struggled to formulate an answer. "I...that is to say...I was...I..."

Curiosity and sympathy warred within him as he watched her struggle. He couldn't fathom why he cared, but he couldn't leave her dangling either. Just like yesterday with the carriage, he couldn't abandon her to try to fix this on her own. "We were in London at this time last year on our return trip from India. 'Tis an amazing time of year to be in that city, if ye like that sort of thing." He gave her a pleasant smile. "Glittering gowns and balls till dawn." Then he shrugged. "I found it a wee bit exhausting."

Agnes and Ainsley both leaned forward in their excitement at his words but Clarissa's shoulders sagged with relief. "I didn't find that it suited me all that much either." Her face was pale but her eyes grateful.

"I understand," he answered as kindly as he could. "I prefer the quiet of my home." His tongue itched to ask her more. Why she didn't want to be in London. She was a mystery he was so tempted to unravel. Why did she seem so immune to his charms? Why didn't she like London?

She gave him a curious look as though she didn't quite believe him.

Fiona cleared her throat. Her hand reaching for her cousin's once again in an almost protective gesture. Then she turned to him, giving him a bright smile. "You went overland for this trip rather than by sea. Why lengthen the journey?"

He had the distinct impression Fiona was changing the subject on purpose. She was also protecting Clarissa, but why? "Aye. I love the sea, but spring in Scotland is a sight my eyes missed."

"We should go riding tomorrow," Emilia suggested, speaking for

the first time. "We can ride inland toward the loch of Kirkcaldy."

Several younger members of the party nodded their agreement and he smiled to himself. No one beat a Scot on a horse. He was sure this was Fiona's place to shine. Because he wanted a Scot bride, not a prickly Sassenach with big grey blue eyes that cried out to him for comfort.

Tomorrow would be the day he put Lady Clarissa out of his mind and focused on a proper Scottish lass.

Chapter 4

Clarissa was not going riding. She sat in the breakfast salon assessing her four cousins. Uncle Haggis had his paper up, ignoring the conversation. Her aunts sipped their tea.

“First of all, I don’t like it all that much. Second, I don’t want to spend time socializing, except of course with the four of you, and third—”

Ainsley cut her words off. “But the four of us will all be there and you’ll be here by yourself.”

“I am truly fine with that. Alone time is what I need—”

“You need a distraction,” Emilia nodded. “The less you think, the less you’ll remember.”

“Besides,” Fiona added. “I’ve the perfect horse for a novice rider.”

Clarissa’s eyes narrowed. She loved Fiona but her cousin could be a real menace if she scented an opportunity to play a trick. There was nothing her cousin loved better.

“Please, Clarissa? I don’t want to go without you,” Agnes begged from her right.

The last plea was her undoing. She couldn’t deny Agnes anything. “Very well,” she sighed. “But no tricks with the horse, Fiona.”

Fiona gave her a feline grin and Clarissa cringed. She was going to regret her decision. She was about to give Fiona another warning when Ewan and Kieran came striding into the breakfast room. Her words died on her tongue as Ewan’s green eyes captured hers and that wave of sickening butterflies filled her stomach.

He was altogether too disconcerting. Here to court her cousin, his eyes strayed to her far too often. Though she had to admit that he’d saved her during their discussion at tea yesterday and on the roadside. While he had some gentlemanly tendencies, it didn’t make him less a rake. He was obvious in interest of her even while being a potential bridegroom to Fiona. After what had happened to her, she had no use for a man like that.

She turned away. “Fiona,” she whispered. “Are you considering Lord Dumfries?”

“Da is considering him.” Fiona shrugged. “I am far less certain.”

“I agree. He appears to be a first-class rake to me.” Clarissa gave a nod.

Fiona rolled her eyes. Her trepidation the day before had vanished like the mist. It was so like Fiona. Clarissa had a much harder time shaking off her feelings.

“Do not be ridiculous. He’s not a rake, just a bore.” Fiona’s words came out in a rush. “I want a man that makes me sing with life. Not one that wants quiet country strolls.”

Clarissa’s head snapped back. Her cousin didn’t understand. She hadn’t seen the sorts of things that Clarissa had. She vowed to speak with her cousin again soon on the matter.

Ewan cleared his throat as he sat in the empty chair next to her. She tried to keep the rolling waves in her stomach at bay. “Pleasant mornin’ to ye,” he said softly.

“Boring,” Fiona whispered in her other ear.

Clarissa couldn’t help it, her lips twitched into a smile. “Indeed, the sunshine is lovely.”

Fiona made a sound like a snore. Uncle Haggis’s paper dropped to assess her and she folded her hands primly.

Clarissa also did her best to concentrate on her eggs and sausage without looking at Ewan McDougal at all. She wasn’t trying to be rude, but she had no use for male conversation, especially not from a man as suspicious as he or as handsome.

She heard him shuffle, each little noise jangling across her nerves. It was as though she were aware of every move he made. “Will you ride with us today?”

“I’m afraid they’ve talked me into it.” She wrinkled her nose as she looked at him. Which was a horrendous mistake because a tingling reverberated through her at the proximity of his strong jaw, penetrating eyes, and soft lips.

“You don’t like to ride?” He looked...relieved by that information. He gave her a patronizing smile. “I ken ye were an English lady and not a Scottish lass.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” She could feel herself bristle.

He shrugged. “To each his own, I suppose, but every Scot not only likes horses but is a first-rate rider.”

She huffed a breath. He was insulting her again. It seemed as though he thought her less for simply being English. “Does every Scot also have such a high opinion of himself?”

She heard Kieran chuckle, though it was muffled by the food in his mouth. “She’s got you there,” Kieran called across the table.

She could hear one of her aunts clucking her tongue, but she ignored it.

He glared at Kieran and then turned back to her. "It's not an opinion, simply a fact. Scots are as good on a horse as they are with a weapon. That's why the Sas—I mean the English—draft us in droves into their army."

The anger was coursing through her veins, reaching her fingers and toes, making her long to slap him, kick him, or kiss him...though why she had thought that last one she couldn't possibly say. "Is that what all your little barbs are about?" She pointed a glare at him as her eyebrows rose.

"What little barbs?" He fired back, though guilt flitted across his face, pinching his mouth.

"You know perfectly well..."

"Enough, both of you," Uncle Haggis called. "We're breaking fast, not bones."

"My fast is broken." Clarissa stood, tossing her napkin onto the table. Holding one side of her skirt, she did her best to sweep from the room. She'd not tolerate another second of Ewan McDougal.



Ewan watched her walk away, back straight, skirt out to one side,

hips swaying as she went. He couldn't blame her for leaving. Without meaning to, he raked his hands through his hair. He was being an arse. The question was why? One half-blooded English lady should not have him so out of sorts.

He amended to be nicer to her on the outing today. Stop insulting her English heritage. He was making an arse of himself. If he hoped to make Fiona his bride, he'd best not fight with her cousin. His hands found his hair again, his eyes closing for a moment. Did he really hope to make Fiona his bride? It was what he came here for, and he should give her a chance, but somehow all he could focus on was Clarissa whenever she was in the room.

He returned to the task of eating his breakfast but several people around the table gave him curious stares. He swore to himself. This trip had been a disaster.

Two hours later the party set off toward the loch, Ewan riding next to Fiona in the front. She was everything he'd expected her to be on horse. Graceful, in command. He suspected she'd keep up with him if given the chance.

The other ladies fell in line behind them with Agnes and Kieran

at the back.

A horse's snort caused him to turn. Clarissa's horse pawed at the ground, skittering sideways. It was too large and powerful for her by half.

He'd been doing his best to neither look nor talk to her, but a flutter of a different kind rose in his chest. Seeing her on that beast made him afraid. Their eyes met, hers the size of saucers.

"Fiona," she choked. "You said you'd get me a gentle—"

Fiona's laugh cut her off. His eyes swung to her. Her gaze was filled with mischief. He recognized that look. It had annoyed him when she was a child, it always meant trouble. But now, it absolutely terrified him.

He pulled his horse to a stop and turned, reaching back for the reins of Clarissa's animal. But the beast sidestepped and then came up on two hooves, pawing the air.

Ewan nearly cursed and Clarissa's eyes were so wide with fear, she looked like a spectre. But she held on, even as the horse took off across the open land.

He didn't think or speak, he just kicked his own beast into action. His horse was lightning-quick, but Clarissa was so light on that giant steed's back that he was eating the ground before him. Clarissa was bouncing about her sidesaddle, barely keeping her seat. He couldn't hear a sound other than the wind and the thuds of his own heart but she must have been screaming.

Closing the distance between them, he wondered what to do. Should he try for the reins again? But that had spooked the animal to begin with. Pluck her from her seat? They were moving very quickly.

Drawing up next to the horse, he grabbed at the rein and gave it a firm tug, trying to calm the animal with a show of dominance. The horse pulled up and, without hesitation, he grabbed Clarissa around her waist and plucked her from the animal and onto his own saddle across his lap.

He'd expected it to be difficult but her tiny frame slid easily onto his. What he hadn't anticipated was the absolute jolt that shot through his groin at the contact of her bottom against it.

It was deliciously curvy, soft, and a near perfect fit between his thighs. Her arms snaked around his neck and she twisted her torso to press chest to chest. Her breath came out in short gasps and his teeth clenched. She was afraid. Only afraid. It wasn't desire that caused her breath to hitch so.

But he responded to it anyway and the insane urge to lean his head down and kiss those plump, panting lips nearly overtook him.

He slowed his horse to a slow walk. His job was to comfort her, and he tightened his hands around her waist. It was meant to keep her

safe, but it only drew them closer.

Her cheeks were now flushed and her body molded to his. Bloody bullocks, she fit against him like she was meant to be there. He'd been so afraid. Now, holding her in his arms, he wanted to crush her to his chest and never let her go.

He wanted to kiss those pretty lips and then he wanted to feel her skin...his mouth was drawing closer to hers. It wasn't as though he meant to, it was just happening.

Even more strangely, hers seemed to be moving toward his. Her eyes, which had been wide open, were now drifting closed. She wanted to kiss him too.

And that shocked him back to reality. "Are ye all right lass?" His voice was a husky murmur with her body fitted to his.

She blinked several times as though coming back to reality. "You... you saved me." Her honey voice had a breathless quality about it. He nearly groaned, the sound tugging at his manhood, making it even more difficult to not capture her lips with his.

He couldn't help it. Her already loose coif had released several tendrils around her face, glossy soft curls that were now brushing against his shirt. He lifted one hand, securely holding her with the other, and brushed the hair back.

Slipping through his fingers, the locks were more like water from a clear stream than anything else. Silkier than he'd imagined, he ached to bury his face in the strands. He'd been dreaming about her hair. Having it trailing over his chest, his hands tangled in the locks. To touch them nearly undid him.

"You didn't think I was going to let that horse kill ye, did ye?" He gave a little chuckle and God help him, he let his hand slide into her hair at the nape of her neck.

She looked to the side then. "You've earned the right to tell me you were correct."

Confusion clouded his mind. He didn't understand what she might be referring to, but perhaps that was just because, in turning her head, she'd exposed the creamy column of her neck. And he was trying to decide which he'd most like to kiss, her lips or the trail of skin from her ear to the neckline of her dress. "What are ye talkin' about, lass?"

"You said that a Sassenach can't ride like a Scot. I am the only one whose horse ran away with its rider." She bit her lip, still looking to the side.

And that was when all reason left his brain. Because the sight of those perfect little teeth nibbling on that full, sumptuous-looking skin was more than a man could take. His fingers slid from her hair, across the delicate column of her neck and to her chin where he gently turned her face back to his.

His head dipped and his body tightened at the thought of claiming those lips for his own.

"Is everyone all right over there?" Kieran called.

Curse words he hadn't said in years bubbled to the forefront of his tongue but he pressed his lips together to keep them from tumbling out.

Instead he whispered, "Tonight we can plan your revenge against Fiona."

And that was when it happened. She gave him a smile with no malice, no distrust even, just a beautiful unreserved grin that lit every hollow of her face. "Thank you," she whispered back.

"For helping with revenge?" He brushed another tendril as it blew in the breeze. Her hair might be his undoing.

"For not telling me how I am a useless Sas—" she started.

"Don't say it," he growled back because suddenly he was embarrassed by those words. For lumping her in with the men that had sent him off to war.

Kieran reined his horse next to them, Fiona just on his other side. Clarissa leveled her with a glare and for once, it was nice to not have it trained on him. "Fiona McDougal," she snapped. "Were you attempting to orchestrate my death?"

"Don't be silly." Fiona looked less sure of herself now. Not so pleased with her jest.

Clarissa had one arm around his neck but the other came to her hip. "That horse could have killed me. That isn't funny, Fi-o-na." She drew out her cousin's name to make her point.

"If you'd seen yourself, you might have thought it was comical," Fiona answered, looking to the side.

"It was dangerous," Ewan scolded, unable to help himself. Fiona's tricks had always annoyed him and this one made him downright furious. He'd been so afraid for Clarissa. His hand tightened around her waist at the thought.

Fiona leveled him with a glare. "She's my family. I am the one who cares for her. I don't see that it's any of your business what happens to the *English miss*."

Ewan winced because she was correct. He'd done nothing but insult her English heritage. Many of his soldiers had suffered tremendously at the hand of the very men they'd fought for. Not only were they pushed to the front of the line again and again, suffering great losses, but when they returned home many of their lands had been confiscated and their families sent away in the name of progress.

But Clarissa had nothing to do with any of that.

Not that he wanted to marry an Englishwoman, but insulting her was just plain childish.

He looked down at her to say something, anything to explain himself but her eyes were now cast to the ground. "Lord Dumfries," her voice was just above a whisper. "Would you please take me back to the castle? I am done riding for the day."

"Of course," he replied. But his insides twisted again because he could hear the hurt in her voice.

The ride back was silent, which he was alternately grateful for

and worried about. Was she angry with him?

But her body remained pressed to his, head in the crook of his neck, his arm tucked around her waist. Never in his whole life had a woman felt this good against him. He leaned down and caught a whiff of her scent. Like spring flowers after a rain, it filled him with calm even as it excited him.

The castle came into view and he tightened his grip. He didn't want to let her go. "Are ye sure you wish to return, lass?"

"Oh yes, thank you, though." She sat up a little straighter and he regretted asking. "Thank you again for rescuing me." She didn't look at him but her pink cheeks gave away her emotion.

"I'd never let anything happen to ye," he said, surprised how much he meant the words.

She looked in his eyes then. The look tugged at his heart. Ach, he wanted to kiss her. "With any luck you'll never need rescue me again."

He wasn't exactly sure that would be lucky. In fact, with any luck, he'd have her tucked against him like this in the very near future. The thought near scared him out of his wits because he shouldn't want an English lass who could barely ride a horse. But something about her felt so right. He wasn't ready to throw away his principles but he wouldn't dismiss these feelings either. For the first time in a very long time he was alive again.

Chapter 5

Clarissa sat curled up in the library with a novel, exactly where she had wanted to be. So why did she feel so empty with everyone off and her here alone?

She could admit to one thing, her swirling thoughts were not about Lord Davenport, as they had been for days and weeks now. Instead they were on Lord McDougal.

She had to give him some modicum of credit. He'd come to her aid, twice. But his interest in her was obvious despite being here to court her cousin, which definitely made him a rake.

But he hated her English blood, and she his rakish ways, and so there was nothing left to think about really. Except she couldn't seem to put him out of her mind.

Sighing, she closed the book. She wasn't getting any reading done. Her Aunt Rhona walked into the library. She didn't start browsing the titles but instead walked straight toward Clarissa. Clarissa held back a sigh. Clearly, her aunt wanted to discuss something.

"My wee bairn, how are ye fairin'?" Aunt Rhona kissed her cheek as she stood to greet her elder.

"Fine, Aunt Rhona." She gave a weak smile.

"Are you going to tell me about what happened?"

"Fiona gave me a wild horse and I nearly was killed. Lord McDougal—"

"Lamb, I know about all that. I'm askin' about London." Her aunt reached for her hand giving it a squeeze.

With a sigh, she sat down and her aunt did too. "It was humiliating."

"I can only imagine. Judith says you haven't spoken a word about it. I think it's time. Don't you?"

She gave a mute nod, dreading this moment. But somehow, it didn't hurt quite as much as the other times she attempted to discuss it. "It was the engagement party. It was supposed to be the event of the season. It's not every day a marquess becomes betrothed." She had been swept up in the excitement of it, she could admit that to herself.

In less than two months, they'd gone from first meeting to engaged. Every lady knew that publicly announcing the match was a pinnacle moment.

Engaged couples were allowed time alone. Not that he'd been anything other than proper. But if the marriage fell through, the lady was ruined.

"How did the betrothal come about? Were you in love with him?" Her aunt was still holding her hand and she gave it a tiny squeeze.

"No, of course not. My father had arranged it. He wanted to see me attached to a strong title. I had heard the rumors about Lord Davenport, a gambler and a rake, but he was so attentive when we were together. He was handsome and complimentary, I thought our feelings would grow over time. I was such a fool."

"You are young. And you were trying to make the best of an arranged marriage." Her aunt gave her a gentle smile.

Clarissa took a shaky breath, the shame of what had happened washing over her once again. "My father was getting ready to make the toast but Lord Davenport was nowhere to be found. Five minutes past and then ten." Her insides twisted into knots remembering the shame of standing there waiting for him, all eyes on her. It was nothing compared with what was about to come. "Two hundred people and I could have heard a pin drop. Then a howling laugh cut through the silence." Her hands pressed into her eyes as nausea rose in her stomach. "He's tupping a maid!" Tears burned at the back of her eyes but she wouldn't let them fall.

"Oh, lamb." Her aunt reached for her but she barely felt the touch as she relived the moment.

"Two hundred eyes turned to me. Some laughing, some appalled, some filled with pity. I heard a woman yell, 'She couldn't even get him to the altar.'" A tiny sob broke out. "I just ran. The next day I wrote the letter and three days later I set off for the castle. I haven't shown my face in any respectable establishment in London since and I might never again." she meant those words with every ache of her beating heart. She hadn't done a thing wrong and yet a careless rake had destroyed her life. She'd fled her home, friends, even family. She'd never fall prey to a man like that again.

"Don't say such things," her aunt clucked. "You're young and beautiful and not at fault that your father made a match with a known rogue. There will be others."

She shook her head. "I'm as good as ruined. That kind of scandal, only the most desperate of men would even consider—"

"Lass, England isn't the only place to find a future. Even your father chose a Scottish bride."

She shook her head. "I'll never open myself up like that again."

While she hadn't envisioned herself a spinster, she couldn't see herself marrying either. And if she did, it certainly wouldn't be to someone so carelessly handsome like Ewan. She'd need someone safe.

"Oh, Clarissa. Don't let a man you didn't even love close your heart." Aunt Rhona's eyes pleaded with her.

Giving a nod, Clarissa kept her thoughts to herself. She couldn't imagine trusting like that ever again.

Long after her aunt had left the library those words reverberated through her chest.



With Clarissa gone, Ewan attempted to focus his attention on the ride and the woman he was here to court.

Fiona was everything he'd expected a wife to be. Her horsemanship was excellent, her ability to ride tireless, and even when it began to drizzle, she pushed forward, first to reach the loch. This was the type of woman who could work alongside him to repair his land.

But with her energy came a tireless need for adventure, which filled him with dread. He'd had all the adventure one life could handle, and now he wanted to rest in the country with a simple life.

His mind kept drifting to the library. Before they'd left, he'd heard Clarissa say that was where she would be. He envisioned her tucked by the fire, book in hand, steaming pot of tea by her side.

It sounded...divine. And as they approached the loch, he looked over the darkening water in the drizzle and realized that the grey blue of Clarissa's eyes were exactly the color of the water on a cloudy day.

But that didn't matter. So what if she looked like a piece of Scotland? She was English, and though he wouldn't denigrate her any longer for it, it still didn't change the fact that she'd likely want to continue her life in London. She deserved it. He could see by her gowns she came from wealth. What did he have to offer really? Years of war and a broken-down piece of land.

A rider appeared on the other side of the loch. He was wearing the green and red tartan of the Campbell Clan.

Fiona kicked her horse forward, "What are ye doin' here?" she called out angrily.

The other riders had caught up and he heard Emilia and Ainsley giggling.

“Out with it now, lassies. What is so funny?”

Emilia hid her smile, trying to look innocent but Ainsley burst out, “That’s Colin Campbell. Colin and Fiona are always at odds. Mum swears they’re sweet on each other.”

“Ainsley McDougal,” Emilia chastised. “Stop your prattling.”

Belatedly Ainsley realized the implication of what she had said. But Ewan only shrugged. It was not so uncommon for a woman or a man to fancy someone else when a marriage was arranged.

It didn’t mean they wouldn’t suit one another.

With that in mind, he kicked his horse forward to join Fiona’s conversation.

As he approached, he could hear the arguing, but he couldn’t make out the words. Finally he caught Colin say, “You’d be married already if ye learned to curb your tongue.”

He could only see a third of Fiona’s face, but that third turned bright red at his words. “You’ve got to do better than that, Colin Campbell. Everyone knows no decent woman would have ye.”

“It’s not a decent woman that I’m—”

“Hey now,” Ewan called, intentionally interrupting the exchange. Those were no words to be saying to a lady, whether Fiona could handle them or not. If someone had spoken them to Clarissa... He forced his mind to focus back on Fiona.

“And who are ye?” Colin’s eyes raked up and down them.

“Lord McDougal is my intended.” She threw the words at Colin as though throwing a stone. Colin’s head snapped back, eyes blinking, and Ewan felt as shocked as Colin looked.

There had been no formal arrangement made. Up to this point, he could climb on his horse and return home with only a *thank you*. But her declaration changed things entirely.

But it was only to Colin and out of anger. Surely the other man would understand if he explained they weren’t formally...

“Well that’s wonderful news,” Ainsley chirped behind him. “Da will be so happy to hear it.”

His teeth snapped together and Fiona whipped her head around, panic making her eyes bulge as they met his. She clearly hadn’t meant to say the words but now they were out and there was no taking them back.

Colin gave a terse shake of his head. “Congratulations to ye both.” Then he turned his horse and was gone.

There was nothing to be said with the rest of the party watching and so he stared absently at the lake, a sick pit of dread filling his stomach.

He’d come here to court Fiona, he told himself. But Clarissa’s image danced behind his eyelids. Which was absurd; he hardly knew

her and he wasn't interested in an English lady.

She could barely ride a horse. She spoke with an English accent.

She smelled like flowers in the rain.

Emilia and Ainsley seemed to sense that something was wrong. They were silently appraising both Fiona and him. Kieran stood off to the side, whistling. For once, he wasn't complaining about the mist falling. Only Agnes seemed unaffected. She stood at the shore of the loch taking in the mountains and the water, oblivious to the drama unfolding behind her.

Finally Emilia cleared her throat, "The rain is worsening. Let's return."

They all returned to their horses, Agnes giving the loch one final glance. "Scottish lochs may be the most beautiful sight in the world."

Kieran gave her a wink. "You should see the loch my home sits on. Puts this to shame."

"Oh, I'd like to see that." Agnes nodded as Kieran aided her onto her horse.

Ewan turned to help Fiona, but she'd seated herself already. Like a true Scottish lass.

Why did getting exactly what he wanted make him feel miserable?

Chapter 6

Clarissa glanced out the window of the library when the party returned, glad to see them back. She still ached inside, but a little less than she had this morning. Perhaps someday, her anger and sadness would abate.

It also occurred to her that some of her resentment toward Ewan was just a redistribution of her anger at Lord Davenport, whom she hadn't allowed an audience before she left London. In retrospect she should have seen him, if only to tell him how much she hated him and every breath he took.

But that wasn't Ewan's fault and while she had labeled him a rake, he had no real commitment to Fiona. Perhaps she'd misjudged the situation.

Ainsley and Emilia rushed into the library, their eyes wide, as they approached her.

"Fiona declared her engagement to Lord McDougal," Ainsley burst out.

Clarissa's hands balled into fists. She hadn't misjudged at all. He was giving her long glances while tying himself to her cousin.

"She can't marry him," her voice was far breathier than she intended. "He's ill-intentioned."

"It's not his fault that Fiona is so hot-headed." Emilia gave her a curious stare.

Clarissa blinked twice, absorbing those words. As Emilia rushed through the explanation of what had happened, Clarissa's shoulders sagged. It didn't matter, she told herself. That he hadn't actually been acting as a rake made no difference, even if her heart cried that it did. She'd no intention of marrying, especially not a man courting her beloved cousin, but somehow it filled her with loneliness to see them actually paired. But perhaps she'd feel that way no matter what. It wasn't any feelings toward Ewan, simply a reminder that she wouldn't marry as all of her cousins would.

Walking into the foyer, she saw Ewan softly whispering in her ear. Clarissa had no idea what he said, but Fiona nodded several times. His

hand was on Fiona's elbow, and she leaned her head down, almost touching his chest as he spoke.

The pose was so intimate that a stab of pain pierced her chest. She turned her head away. It didn't matter. But all the same, she couldn't watch them snuggled together, deep in an intimate discussion.

Holding her book, she decided she might read after all. Perhaps in her room, or mayhap she'd find the attic, or an outbuilding. Somewhere far away from the scene unfolding.

Ewan's gaze caught hers and she inhaled sharply. She quickly schooled her features into a blank expression, but she feared he'd seen her look of pain before it had been erased.

She knew now that Scotland hadn't been far enough to escape her heartache. Not even close. If anything, this was worse. Perhaps she should move to America.

Turning away, she slowly climbed the stairs to her room. What she needed was to be alone.

But that wasn't meant to be. Two hours later, Agnes opened her door, huffing and tossing herself onto the bed. Ainsley followed, looking equally sullen.

"It is generally polite to knock." She raised her eyebrows as Ainsley also threw herself across the bed.

"What?" Agnes tilted her head to look at her. "My apologies." She waved her hand, dismissing her gaff.

"They left without us," Ainsley pouted.

"Who?" Clarissa asked, attempting to keep up with the conversation.

"Lord McKenna, Lord McDougal, Fiona, and Emilia." Agnes huffed as though it should be obvious. "They said the weather had cleared and they wished to go on a proper ride."

"We said we would join them, but we were told this was a smaller party and not to bother." Ainsley crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't like Lord McKenna." Agnes burst out. "It was surely his idea to leave us out. I bet he doesn't like us simply because we're English."

Clarissa bit back a smile. It eased some of her ache. "Lord McDougal is the one who's spoken out against the English."

"That's right and what has that got to do with me?" Ainsley stuck her thumb in her chest.

Agnes rolled her eyes. "You're too young to understand."

"You're only three years older than me." Ainsley stood, her hands planted on her hips.

"It's an important three years." Agnes placed her hands on her hips as though it made her an authority. "I'll come out next season and..."

"English snob." Ainsley stuck out her tongue.

“See,” Agnes pointed at her. “Childish.”

Clarissa cleared her throat. “I’m sure they had a perfectly good reason.” Taking a breath, she pushed through the next words. “Fiona and Lord McDougal are getting married. And perhaps Lord McKenna has decided to court Emilia. She has such a lovely—”

But she stopped because Agnes had given a tiny, almost inaudible gasp. Looking at her cousin, she could see that Agnes had paled and her lips trembled. Perhaps Agnes didn’t dislike Lord McKenna quite as much as she had declared.

Dinner that evening, with all the company assembled, may have been one of the most uncomfortable events she’d attended in quite some time. Besides her own engagement party, of course.

Fiona was silent and sullen. Though why that would be, Clarissa had no idea.

Ainsley and Agnes were still angry. Agnes mostly pouted, which was in stark contrast to her normally bubbly personality, while Ainsley did her best to throw barbs at every opportunity.

“How was the ride?” Uncle Haggis asked.

“Lovely,” Ewan had answered.

“I wish I knew.” Ainsley stuck out her lip.

Ewan cleared his throat, looking at her uncle. “The morning ride was rained out and so we took a second, smaller party out in the afternoon.”

Uncle Haggis winked. “Of course. Small groups make for better conversation.” Than he chuckled at his own meaning.

Both Ewan and Fiona gave him a strained smile.

Kieran joined in the chuckle. “Interesting conversation, indeed.”

Agnes whipped her head around. “If you had any manners, you’d conduct yourself as a gentleman.”

His eyebrows rose. “There was nothing ungentlemanly in what I just said.”

Agnes tossed her napkin on her plate. “And what about sitting on your horse while women are stranded on the side of the road?”

“Agnes,” Aunt Judith chastised. “What has gotten into all of you this evening?”

Aunt Judith looked to Clarissa with a questioning glance but Clarissa understood as little as her aunt. She would have to speak with Agnes and find out.

Ewan knew exactly what was happening within the group at the table, which didn't improve his mood whatsoever. Clarissa had not looked at him once, nor had she spoken a word.

He'd seen the way she'd looked at him and Fiona. But there was nothing to do for it. He'd not let Fiona be shunned as a jilted bride, even it meant his own happiness. He was first and foremost a man of honor, and that meant standing by Fiona, rather than allowing her to be ruined. But damn, it was difficult. Every glance at Clarissa heated his blood. He wanted to explore those feelings with her, not tie himself to Fiona.

He considered explaining it to her but then thought better of it. It somehow implied there was something between them when there wasn't.

As dinner finished, several members of the party shot up, as though they couldn't wait to exit the dining room.

Uncle Haggis looked at Aunt Rhona as though they'd all gone mad. "Everyone to the music room." He clapped his hands. "McDougals don't go to bed early."

If they could have, they'd all have groaned aloud. But the group dutifully filed up the main stairs and into the spacious music room.

Agnes clapped when she saw the pianoforte at one end of the room. "You have one!"

"It's Scotland, not the ends of the earth." Ainsley grumped. She was likely still angry about their discussion earlier.

"Is it all right if I play?" she asked.

Uncle Haggis gave her a broad smile, "Of course, lass. That's why we're here."

She seated herself on the bench and tested a few keys. Clarissa also loved to play. She and Agnes spent hours practicing. After Agnes's father had passed two years ago, her cousin and aunt came to live with her family. Clarissa had actually missed her first season to mourn with them.

Lord Davenport had begun his courtship before she'd even officially come out. She supposed she'd never had a real season, not that it mattered to her.

Agnes broke into a light and playful song that melted any melancholy off her face.

Everyone broke into a smile as her skillful fingers danced over the keys. Her aunts began to clap, swaying to the music while Emilia grabbed Ainsley's arm and, pulling her from the chair, broke into a jig.

Clarissa grinned too, clapping with her aunts. Even Fiona returned to herself, jumping up and circling around her sisters.

Kieran had the largest grin of all. "It soothes my tired soul." He tilted his head back, letting the music wash over him.

As the song ended, Agnes turned to Clarissa. "Why don't you play that Highland song you've been working on?"

Clarissa hesitated. It was mournful song about the tyranny of the English. Her mother had insisted she learn it but the mournful strains had spoken to her. She was sure Ewan would likely enjoy it but it would depress the mood that had just lifted. "It's awfully melancholy."

Agnes waved her hand. "It's Aunt Fenella's favorite and Clarissa plays it beautifully."

It was, indeed, her mother's favorite song that Clarissa played. Clarissa took a seat on the bench, going through each section of the song in her mind. Taking a breath, she tapped a few keys to test them and then struck the first notes.

She hadn't played since everything had happened. But all the pain and humiliation rushed to her fingertips and cried out in the notes of the song. She didn't look at anyone, she barely looked at anything, even the keys in front of her, as all that emotion poured into the song.

The sadness, anger, inability to affect change. Every note struck an emotional chord. Each stroke of a key coming from her heart until the very last note died.

No one had made a sound through the piece and it took a few moments before she could bring herself to open her eyes.

Slowly, fluttering them open, she looked to the assembled guests. Aunt Judith sat crying, tears silently sliding down her face. When their eyes locked, her aunt's face spasmed in pain. "I can't imagine how much it hurt, Clarissa."

"Please don't." Her eyes searched every face then, to see their reaction. Aunt Rhona held her hands over her mouth while Fiona and Emilia looked at their laps.

Uncle Haggis reached up to wipe a tear from his eye. That almost undid her, because she'd never seen her uncle cry.

Last, her eyes met Ewan's. He had given up his seat and stood two steps in front of the settee he'd been seated on, his hand partially raised toward her. His face was a mask of stone, his brows drawn together, though she didn't know if he pitied her or was simply reacting to the emotion of the song. But she didn't want to find out.

"I...I'm very tired. I think I'll go to bed." She stood abruptly, knocking the bench backward.

Uncle Haggis stood then too. He shook his head. "I love ye like my own daughter. So I'm going to tell you that it's time to stop running. Most of all, from yer family and from yer self."

Words failed her as the truth of the statement slammed into her. She'd physically run from London, but emotionally she ducked away every time it was difficult. She gave a nod to acknowledge her uncle but couldn't make her voice work to answer. Clearing her throat, she finally answered, "I will."

Then she turned to pick up the bench and suddenly Ewan was next to her. She couldn't look at him and so she struggled to right the bench instead. Strong hands lifted the wooden frame she'd been grasping to haul it back up.

She reached for the cushioned seat to slide it back in place but his hand grazed hers. She made to pull back but he held it tight. Then she looked in his eyes. She was afraid he would ask questions or look at her with pity, but he did neither. Instead his eyes were kind, filled with understanding. "I was wrong about you, lass. You're a Scot through and through."

She returned the smile. That validation eased her ache. He didn't ask her anything else as he helped her stand. Walking back around the pianoforte, he offered her his elbow. She took it, and somehow touching him made it easier to take her seat rather than run away.

Her family was still looking at her, but the gazes had changed. Instead of sadness or pity, they were watching her with...curiosity. Now, what was that all about?

Chapter 7

Ewan tried to get his emotions under control. War had made him exceptionally disciplined so the feeling of spinning wildly off course was shocking, nauseating, and just a touch exhilarating too. Fortunately, it was the middle of the night and he was alone in his room so no one would witness as he came undone.

He knew exactly what was causing the emotion. That little pixie, Clarissa. What confounded him was what to do about it.

Earlier that day, he'd travelled with Fiona, Kieran, and Emilia to the Campbell estates under the guise of going for another ride. He and Fiona had ridden in front.

“What will you say to him?” He'd asked.

“I know how to handle, Colin.” She bit back.

Irritation washed through him. “As well as you handled him earlier? This affects us both. I’ve a right to know what you’ll say.”

He heard her breath hiss out. “I’ll tell him the truth. I made up it up and you were too much a gentleman to call me out. Does that make you happy? I’ll be humiliated.”

“I don’t wish to see you humiliated.” He turned to look at her then. “If we were to actually marry, none of this would be necessary.”

Her face pinched but her answer was guarded. “Do ye want to marry me?”

He considered his answer, but decided to ask a question instead. “Are ye in love with Colin?” He needed to know. This was their future.

“Are ye in love with Clarissa?” She turned to him, eyes flashing.

He blinked a few times. He barely knew her. Of course he wasn’t in love. But there was this pull that he couldn’t deny.

For the moment, he couldn't leave Castle Kounan. While Fiona sought out Colin and explained why she'd said what she did, there was no telling what might happen. If Colin announced her error to his clan, Fiona would need his help.

He'd allow her to publicly denounce him. Then she wouldn't be humiliated. He didn't live here, it was no trouble to him. But she'd never live it down.

But he couldn't escape his attraction to Clarissa, though she'd given him almost no encouragement.

Her pain had been near palpable while she'd played the pianoforte and, like a bolt of lightning, he'd become aware of what had been hidden just below her surface. He didn't know what she'd been through, but he knew her feelings mirrored his own. That desire to run and hide from the world that had been so cruel.

He masked it better, with angry barbs about the bloody English. But there was an understanding of shared pain.

One that was difficult to accept if ye hadn't been through it. Their second riding party of the day had been a trip to Campbell lands. They'd decided it would be best if Fiona explained to Colin that she wasn't exactly engaged. Fiona had blurted out on the ride there that Ewan was too serious for her to marry anyway.

The lass was angry and lashing out. But deeper than that, she likely found him too stoic. He couldn't help it though, he'd seen too much to want to frolic without considering responsibility and he needed a woman who would understand what he'd been through.

So unless Colin outed Fiona, he'd likely not marry her. Much as he wanted to be settled, she wasna right for him.

And Clarissa. He ran his hands through his hair, sitting up in bed. It was no use lying down. He grabbed his kilt and pulled it on, stalking over to the window to watch the moonlight play along the ocean. Clarissa was all wrong for completely different reasons.

She was too wrapped in her own cloak of agony to open her heart. He gave his head a shake. Was that what he wanted? Her heart? His brain was going soft.

She didn't like him and, what was more, she needed time to heal.

Even if that wasn't true, he'd said he wanted a true Scottish lass. He ran his hands through his hair again. What did that even mean? No she didn't have wild hair as she flew across the heather on her horse, but she was strong, full of emotion, passionate, and beautiful. She was glorious. Would he really pass that up because her father was English?

The swish of paper caught his attention. He watched as a folded

note slipped under his door. In an instant he was sprinting across his room. He didn't need to read it to know Clarissa had delivered it; the paper smelled of her.

For a second, he considered reading the words first but then she'd be gone, and so instead, he wrenched open the door and stepped into the hall.

Clarissa had only made it a few paces, but her back was to him. As she turned, surprise lit her features and she opened her mouth. Afraid she would scream, he stepped up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist, the other coming to cover her mouth.

The soft fabric of her nightdress rubbed against his bare chest as her body molded to his. His arm fit perfectly in the crook of her back as her breasts crushed against him. He'd meant to tell her that he'd do her no harm. That he grabbed her to keep them from being discovered. But at the contact of their bodies, all reason left his mind.

Instead he removed his hand and replaced it with his lips. Slanting open her mouth, his tongue plundered hers as the taste of honey made him groan with need.

As his tongue withdrew and then repeated the tasting, it was met by her own tongue tentatively returning the gesture.

He nearly came undone. Backing her against the wall, he deepened the kiss further, pressing their bodies together, his hands molding to her ripe buttocks to lift her higher, press them closer still.

His cock was near bursting, and as he lifted her higher, it settled between her legs, only their clothes separating them. But he knew he'd reached the spot where she needed contact because she bucked and moaned. "Yes," her voice hissed.

Continuing to plunder her mouth, he lifted her further, rubbing her against him. Her legs locked around his waist and luscious hips started working to help him with the movement. All the while making the most delicious little noises.

He tried to recall the last time he held a woman like this or when a female had responded so instantly and completely to his touch.

But he couldn't picture anything but her. Dimly, he was aware they were still in the hall and he picked her up, not stopping the rhythm, but he started carrying her into his room. They needed some privacy.

But as they stepped through the door, her body went rigid against his and she began pushing him away.

"What's the matter, lass?" he asked, completely mystified by her sudden change of behavior.

"I...I...shouldn't be in your room." She stopped struggling, talking calming her. "I don't know what I was thinking."

He held her still, not moving but not letting her go. "I just thought you'd not want to be discovered in the hall."

“Of course I don’t. But anything could happen in your chamber—”

He gave her a small, light kiss. “Nothing’s going to happen, lass. Nothing that you don’t want.” He kissed her again and she softened, just a little.

“No bed,” he crooned softly. “And all of our clothes stay on.” He kissed a trail along her cheek to her ear and then down her neck. “My kilt won’t move an inch. I thought just to finish ye with what we were doing. Rubbing and kissing...nothing more.”

“That’s it.” She arched her neck back to allow him access. “We won’t actually do...that?”

He felt her skin heat and he smiled as he continued kissing down her neck to her collarbone. “Nae, mo chridhe. I just want to bring you a little pleasure. Nothing more. I swear it.”

She flexed her hips to rub against him just a little and he groaned as a coo escaped her lips. Using his hands, he guided her up and down as she rubbed against his clothed shaft, her moans growing faster and louder.

He longed to lift the hem of her nightdress and sink a finger inside her, feel her wetness and her heat but he had promised, and so he resisted.

His lips had reached the neckline of her gown and flicking open the ties with one hand he drew the fabric to the side to take one luscious nipple in his mouth.

He could have done this for hours, but with a single flick of his tongue, she came undone. It was beautiful and so intoxicating that he wanted more.

His lips found hers and kissed her over and over as spasm after spasm wracked her body, his arms creating a cradle for her.

Then she melted into him. It seemed as though every inch of her skin touched his and a fresh wave of need overtook him. Her head cradled into the crook of his neck. “Oh that was...” Her voice drifted off not completing the thought.

He had to get her back to her room before he forgot all about the promise he’d just made.

With that in mind, he sprinted down the hall with her still in his arms, his body pulsing with need. It looked as though he wouldn’t be getting any sleep at all.

Chapter 8

Her first waking thought was that it had been the most delicious

night of her life. Her second was that Ewan McDougal was undoubtedly the second worst rake she'd ever met. Granted, she'd only met two. And the first had destroyed her in front of all of society.

At least this time if she were ruined, she'd had fun. Delicious, wonderful, intoxicating fun. And she deserved to be a fallen woman now. Unlike before, where her only real crime was poor judgment. But a cancelled wedding was unforgivable.

Still, she had to stay far away from Ewan McDougal. She'd likely encouraged him with the letter she'd slipped under his door. She'd thanked him for saving her from the horse. Words she'd meant to say but hadn't.

Fiona flashed through her mind and a wave of guilt nearly knocked her over. She had committed the same sin against Fiona that Michael Davenport had done to her.

Selfish fool, she hissed covering her eyes with her arm. She changed her mind, Ewan was the worst rake she knew. He'd seduced her with sinfully delicious touches that made her forget who he was and what was important to her. At least Davenport had been caught with a scullery maid. What she'd done with Ewan might ruin her relationship with her family.

Dressing quickly, she hurried out of her bedroom, intent on finding Fiona. Somehow she had to explain, make this right.

As for Ewan, she'd never speak to him again. It made her heart ache, she'd never allowed a man such liberties and she might never again. But clearly, it couldn't be special for him. He'd touched her while engaged to another so she pushed her heartache aside. No dewy feelings for rakish lords.

Fiona sat in the breakfast room. She quickly took a seat next to her cousin, Uncle Haggis at his usual spot at the head of the table. "I need to speak with you," she whispered frantically.

"What's wrong?" Fiona asked, leaning her head toward her cousin.

She leaned closer too. Uncle Haggis would interrupt any minute

and she needed to say this as concisely as possible. "Don't marry Lord Dumfries."

Fiona tipped her head back, sitting up straight, mischief dancing in her gaze. "You want him for yourself. I don't blame ye. He's handsome enough. A little serious for my taste, but he'd suit you well. And with the title, yer father might even approve." Then she leaned in. "You should tell him about yer dowry. His lands are near ruined after he'd been gone so long. His brother was too young to care for them."

Clarissa blinked, trying to understand. Fiona and Ewan were getting married, she couldn't pursue him. "He's already engaged to—"

"Not so loud, now." Fiona hissed. "Da is not privy to all these details."

Clarissa nodded her understanding. Parents were best left out 'til it was absolutely necessary. But she wondered what was going on between the Ewan and Fiona. Because it didn't sound like they were to marry. Which was good. Not because she wanted him, even though Fiona seemed to think that she did, but because he couldn't be trusted. He still kissed her passionately when they weren't even courting. Never mind that she'd kissed him back. Never mind they'd done far more. "Well, you've time then. Pick someone else—or no one else. Lord Dumfries is a rake. You don't want a man like that."

Now it was Fiona's turn to look shocked. "He's many things, but a rake isna one of them."

Clarissa stamped her slipper. Agnes kept saying that too. Why didn't they believe her? Only a rake would have done the things they did last night with one woman while being engaged to another. Even if he wasn't really engaged. But how did she tell her cousin that? Should she just tell her the truth?

"He is. I know he is."

"You're letting your past experience color your judgment. Ewan is noble and kind." Part of her felt the truth in that statement. He'd rescued her. Aided them on the side of the road. But part of her just couldn't trust any man, especially not one who swept her into his arms in dark halls and kissed her 'til she couldn't think.

He'd caught her by surprise, but she wouldn't allow it to happen again.

This was it, she had to tell her. Fiona could hate her forever, but she wouldn't allow her cousin to be humiliated the way she'd been. "Fiona, last night, he kissed me and he—"

Surprise colored Fiona's gaze but then it filled with excitement. "No," she squirmed in her seat. "How was it? Did ye like it? Do you want him to do it again? My cousin Elspeth swears there is nothing better in the world than kissing a handsome man."

Clarissa knew her jaw was hanging open, but try as she might, it

refused to close. Then she attempted to speak but no words came out. She'd known she would have to tell Fiona. It wouldn't be right to keep it a secret. She had played this conversation out a dozen ways on her way down to the breakfast room and not one of them had ended like this.

Fiona had gone mad. And truly there must be nothing between them because if Fiona cared for him at all, she wouldn't be reacting so.

Before she could answer, the rake himself walked into the breakfast room. Fiona giggled and winked at Ewan.

Clarissa melted into her seat with embarrassment; the situation grew worse by the second.

Uncle Haggis gave a loud chuckle. "Nice to see you two getting along so well." He stood and crossed over to Ewan, slapping the other man on the back. "My Fiona is quite the catch."

Clarissa sat bolt upright again and Fiona snapped to attention as well. "Da, stop it. That isn't what is happening at all."

"Of course it isn't," Uncle Haggis replied but he winked back at them both.

Ewan crossed his arms over his chest. "Haggis," he started.

But Uncle Haggis waved him off. "Not now, me boy."

Clarissa wondered what Ewan might have said and why her uncle didn't want to hear it. She looked back at Fiona. Yesterday, she'd declared her engagement to Ewan and today she was excited that Clarissa had kissed that very man? If only Fiona knew what they'd actually done.

Everyone was full of surprises today, not least of all herself. Why had she let him do it? She hated rakes, she disliked him. But when he'd touched her, he'd set her to blaze.

Her body heated just remembering their touches. She'd acted like a wanton trollop. No better than that maid or Davenport himself.



Ewan watched her across the table. She'd yet to take a single sip of tea or bite of food. Her head hung low, while her shoulders hunched.

He shouldn't have feckin' kissed her. She looked absolutely miserable. He'd speak with her the first chance he got, to see if he could make it right.

Fiona winked at him again and held up her hand, pointing at Clarissa. Bullocks, she'd told Fiona.

Of course she had. She loved her cousin and as far as she was concerned, she'd participated in an infidelity.

If he weren't at breakfast, he'd slap himself silly. His head momentarily came down into his hands.

He really was spiraling out of control.

When he lifted it, she was gone.

He tried to catch her for the next three days but Haggis hadn't been kidding. When she decided to run, she was mighty good at it.

Fortunately, he had a plan. He knew she loved to read and so he decided to camp out in the library. The rest of the party had gone out for a picnic on a rare day of sun. He guessed that she'd think him gone and finally come out of her room.

Sure enough, not twenty minutes after Kieran bravely escorted four women outside, and declaring the task of escorting four ladies on a picnic more difficult than battle, his little pixie flitted into the library.

He'd tucked himself into a corner, a subversive tactic to be sure. But he wanted her well into the room before she knew he was there. Eliminate her ability to run.

She peeked into the room and he smiled at the tentative way she looked around, missing him in the corner.

She tiptoed in and headed to the far shelf.

Silently, he got up and walked behind her. She was humming to herself as her fingers trailed along the spine of several books. "Hello." He spoke just behind her, grinning as she near jumped out of her skin.

"You frightened me," she chastised as she made to move around him.

His hand came to her waist, "We need to talk."

She stopped moving but didn't look at him. "I disagree."

"You promised your uncle that you'd stop running away," he responded in a soft voice close to her ear.

"I did stop running from what happened in London. And I'm not running now, but I am ensuring nothing else happens between us," she whispered.

That made him stand straighter. "I am sorry about that. I should never have—"

"No, you shouldn't have." Her face tightened in pain. "I love Fiona like a sister." Her breath caught on the last word.

His tongue ached to tell her that there was nothing between him

and Fiona. Colin had been silent for days and Emilia had been making daily trips to town to listen for gossip. If nothing else came of it, they'd likely tell Haggis in another week a match hadn't been made and he'd return home. To an empty house, with only his brother for company and the few soldiers who'd had nowhere else to go. "You told Fiona what happened, did you not?"

"Not all of it, but some."

"And what was her reaction?" He was leaning closer again, her scent drawing him in.

She looked at him then, her confusion evident. He sucked in his breath. Even more beautiful this close, he ached to kiss her again. "She seemed excited."

"Listen to your cousin, then. And understand that we didn't do anything to hurt her." He couldn't help it, his lips brushed her ear.

She jerked away as if burned. "Even if it doesn't hurt Fiona, we still shouldn't be touching like this. We are not courting and no gentleman would touch a lady he wasn't married to like that."

She had him there.

He normally prided himself on being a man who did the right thing. It had been a very long time since he'd done something so... irresponsible.

Some small part of him liked it. Perhaps Fiona's comment affected him, but there was something satisfying about kissing ladies when he knew he shouldn't. "There's little harm in a touch of fun."

Her eyes darkened and narrowed. "There is to me. I will not be laid low by another rake...I—" Her hand clapped over her mouth.

Another rake? Was that why she had run from London? Had she been ruined by a man?

A fury like he hadn't felt in the longest time coursed through his veins. "Who?" he rasped.

But she just shook her head, biting her lip. "It doesn't matter now. I have to do as my aunt and uncle suggested and not dwell on the past. My aunt even thinks I could look for a husband here in Scotland, but I won't be a victim again. Do you understand?" There it was again. That vulnerable look she'd worn in the rain the first day he'd met her.

Words he'd never spoken in his life crowded in his mouth. He wanted to demand the man's name and then cut him down with a swipe of his blade. He longed to tell her how beautiful she was and how it didn't matter what she'd done. She was the most precious woman he'd ever met in his life.

But now was not the time nor place to say these things. She didn't even know he wouldn't marry Fiona.

Besides, he'd not wanted to marry an English woman even if she

did make his head spin, and fill him with lust and the need to protect her.

And she'd just said she'd look for a Scottish husband. It made his chest ache with longing.

He gave himself a shake. She didn't want to return to England now, but that wouldn't always be true. And half her family was there. She'd have to visit from time to time. And he'd sworn never to return. He'd lost too much fighting England's war with India, he wouldn't give them the opportunity to take anything else.

Keeping his feelings carefully hidden, he simply replied, "I understand." He gave her a smile and, because he couldn't help himself, he brushed a curl from her face. Her brown lock slid like silk through his fingers. "But stop hiding from your family to avoid me. Your cousins are just on the beach having a picnic. Why don't we join them?"

Taking a breath, she gave a tentative nod. "I'd like that."

"Grab your book. You can read on the beach." Forcing himself to ease away from her, he watched as she plucked a book off the shelf.

He held out his elbow and she took it, giving him a bright smile. "Such a beautiful day for a picnic."

"Aye. It is, lass."

But that didn't last for very long. They hadn't made it ten steps from the house when he noticed the black clouds on the horizon moving quickly in their direction. "Perhaps we should go back inside." He pointed at the sky. "Those clouds are black as the Earl of Hell's waistcoat."

She looked at the wall of dark clouds approaching them. "If the others are on the beach, the cliffs will block their view. They won't see it coming."

"Ye're right. Let's run before we're drooit." He grabbed her hand and started pulling her along.

She gathered up her skirts in one hand as they headed down the steep steps that lead them to the beach. "Which way?" she asked as they reached the bottom.

"They headed south toward the old Dunnet Light House." He pointed right and they started down the beach.

But the clouds moved faster than he'd thought possible and the day grew dark as a clap of thunder rumbled nearby. He drew to a dead stop. He hated the sound of thunder.



Clarissa looked back, confused as to why he had stopped. Part of her wondered if he was up to some rakish business. She'd gone off alone with him, which was actually very silly considering what had happened the last time they were unchaperoned. She'd given him a lovely speech about how much she loved her cousin and how she despised rakes so why did the thought of nefarious deeds on his part fill her with excited longing?

But the expression on his face was all wrong. Rather than a heated gaze he appeared frozen in fear.

"Ewan?"

"I dunna like thunder." He started moving again but a streak of lightning lit the sky immediately followed by another clap of thunder. He froze again, hunching down, like he might drop to the ground.

That was when she saw the rain approaching. Not just mist or even a steady drip but a deluge of water moved toward them. "There's an overhang in the cliff." She pointed. "Let's take shelter." He still didn't move and she began tugging him along.

They reached it just in time as the driving water hit the beach. Because the storm came from the land, they were dry under the large overhang but another bolt of lightning lit the sky and Ewan dropped to the sand covering his ears with his hands.

She fell to her knees next to him and reached out her hand to touch his hair. "Ewan?" she asked again.

His response was to crawl the foot that separated them and place his head in her lap. His body shook and without another thought, she curled her torso over his face, trying to help block out the noise.

Stroking his hair, she rocked him gently as he curled his body around hers and she sang a Scottish lullaby her mother had sang to her as a child.

*Dreams to sell, fine dreams to sell,
Angus is here with dreams to sell.
Hush now wee bairnie and sleep without fear,
For Angus will bring you a dream, my dear.
Can you no hush your weepin'?
All the wee lambs are sleepin'.
Birdies are nestlin', nestlin' taegether,
Dream Angus is hurtlin' through the heather.
Sweet the lavrock sings at morn,
Heraldin' in a bright new dawn.
Wee lambs, they coorie doon taegether
Alang with their ewies in the heather.*

He likely couldn't hear it as the storm raged but she sang it anyway, over and over as he buried deeper into her lap, his hands tightened around her waist as though she were a buoy in the storm. She wouldn't have moved for the world, somehow comforting him seemed more important than anything she'd done in her entire life.

The rain eased and then ceased, while the thunder grew quieter and the storm raged over the sea.

But he didn't let go. He stayed curled into her, and she didn't move either, stroking his hair and singing softly. He'd plucked her from a moving horse, rescued her when stranded on the side of the road, saved her from uncomfortable conversation more than once. What had happened to this strong man to lay him so low?

"Are ye all right?" she asked, adopting her mother's lilt.

He looked up at her then. His eyes still fearful but something else lit them. It was soft and yearning and it made her ache to hold him even closer. "Aye."

He sat up, still holding her around the waist, and kissed her. Softly but it lingered as his hand slid up her back and into her hair.

He pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. "What happened?" One of her hands came up to stroke his cheek as his lips claimed hers again.

Lifting his head, he looked out over the sea. "After the war, the blasts of guns and cannons, I don't like the sound. If I'm prepared, I do all right, but when it takes me unawares..." He shuddered.

Clarissa bent her head down, resting it on his collar, wrapping her hand around his massive chest. What a fool she'd been. Bemoaning her broken pride when this man had suffered real tragedy. "That is terrible."

"I don't ken what I would have done without ye, lass." His hands were in her hair, his lips moving across her temple. She tilted her chin up so that he kissed her again.

She had promised herself she wouldn't but somehow the storm had bonded them. He needed her and sharing his fear had created an emotional connection that only increased her physical desire. When his lips touched hers, she forgot everything else in the world.

Before she even blinked, he had her in his lap, their passion instant and frenzied. Delicious sensations tingled everywhere as his hands ran over her body.

From somewhere in the distance she heard a voice and she ripped her lips from his, throwing herself back against the rock wall. Her hands came to her mouth. What had she just done?

“Don’t get upset, now.” His voice was low and soothing. “I dinna mean to.”

“I am upset...with myself.” And that was the truth about rakes. If a lady allowed herself to fall victim to one, she should learn her lesson. She was angry at Lord Davenport, but even more so, she was angry at herself for allowing him to deceive her.

She played the fool for all of London to see and she was making the same mistake again. She stood, brushing off her skirts. She had to be strong.

“Dunna be upset with anyone.” He stood too and reached for her hand, but she pulled it back. “We’re just doin what comes natural to two people who—”

“Who are what?” She turned away and saw Fiona coming toward them along with Kieran and the rest of her cousins. She lifted her skirts and started toward them.

“Why are ye lookin’ so prickly?” Fiona grinned at her.

“I do not look anything of the sort.” Clarissa stomped her foot, which was completely ineffectual in the sand.

Fiona stepped up to her and then pulled her away from the others. “He’s never going to court you unless you stop being angry all the time.”

“He’s not going to court me, he’s still considering you!” Clarissa nearly shouted.

Fiona gave her a perplexed look. “I told ye already we’re just not telling Da what—”

“Ye didn’t tell me anything. Not really.” Clarissa was near stomping again. This couldn’t be any more confusing. Because despite Fiona’s words at breakfast the other day, they appeared to be considering marriage.

“I lost me temper and told Colin Campbell I was marrying Ewan in two weeks’ time. I explained it to Colin after, but he seemed angry and I am worried that he’ll go and tell the entire village and then I’ll be ruined and embarrassed in front of everyone. Ewan’s only stayin’ around so that if it happens, I can publicly break it off with him and save face in front of everyone. Da will be furious, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“He’s saving you from public embarrassment?” Clarissa thought she might be ill. He hadn’t been untrue to Fiona at all. She hunched over, clutching her stomach. He saved her from runaway horses and broken wagon wheels. He was protecting Fiona from public humiliation.

Her arguments against him were melting and she couldn’t allow that to happen because if she did... she turned to look at him. His piercing stare pinned her to the spot. If she failed at a relationship a

second time she was sure she'd never recover. She just couldn't risk it. She had to build those walls back up.

A rake she could defend herself against. But a gentleman who had no interest in marrying an Englishwoman, what could she do about that? She'd sink under her feelings and still end up with a broken heart.

Chapter 9

Clarissa had his blood near to boil all the while she gave him nothing but cold stares and icy silence. He would catch her, when she thought he wasn't looking, giving him intense looks of longing. It was sheer force of will that she kept up her chilly façade. That was her Scot blood. Stubborn till the end.

But now that he knew he and Fiona were not compatible, he had to find a suitable bride. He didn't care about the dowry anymore either. It'd take work but he'd see it done. But Clarissa had underscored what he'd been feeling for a while. His life had been empty, cold, and barren. He needed someone to fill it with light. Make him dizzy with excitement.

The way Clarissa did. After she'd held him on the beach, he no longer cared that she was English. There'd be some issues to work out but they could do it.

He'd like to tell her all this if she'd ever stop throwing him icy glares. And she needed to melt soon because Haggis was growing impatient. He and Fiona had to tell him they weren't courting because it wasn't right to keep the truth from him. But a little voice deep down told him that if he kept up the lie a little longer, it was that much more time he got with Clarissa. Once the truth was out, he'd have to leave.

But he'd like to clear the air with Clarissa before he went. Hell, he'd like to take her with him. But he understood. He'd most certainly acted the part of rake with her, and he didn't know how to explain that it was only her. He never normally acted so...wanton. That is to say, not for a verra long time. But he lost his senses around her.

Which was about the most fun thing that had happened to him since...well he couldn't rightly remember, it had been so long.

Which meant he needed to speak with her again. He'd already ambushed her in the library. It was unlikely to work again.

Instead, he'd play her trick and slip a note under her door. Her's was one of the sweetest prose he'd ever read. She'd thanked him for coming to her aid and told him how she would never forget him. It

spoke of feelings she'd never expressed in person, unless kissing could be counted.

He waited till the house was quiet and hoped Clarissa was still awake. Then he slipped to her room. He jostled the door intentionally to alert her of his presence and then he slipped the note, catching the paper on the wood under the door. It made a number of scratching noises as it went and he grinned. It wasn't so loud that it would wake the house but loud enough to let her know he was there.

A minute of silence followed and he worried she was still asleep but then the pad of her feet across the floor let him know his tactics had worked. He listened as she unfolded the paper and then nothing.

Holding his breath, he waited. Finally she spoke. "I won't come out, Ewan."

"Will ye talk with me at least?" He pressed closer to the door.

"About what?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, I tell Lord Ravenscraig I'll not be marryin' his daughter. I'd like to ask his permission to court you if you'd allow it. You don't have to promise anything other than you'll spend a little time getting to know me."

Silence followed till it was near deafening. "Ewan, I don't think it's a good idea. I...I'm just not ready."

His gut clenched. He'd been afraid of that. She was still too brokenhearted to see what was happening between them. "Lass, ye're not committing to marriage. And if ye let me, I can help you heal, and perhaps you can help me too. Don't answer now, just think about it." He pressed a little closer. "Please."

"I'll think about it," she answered finally.

He smiled, relief making his breath rush out. "That's good, lass. I'll see you in the morning."



Clarissa was feeling anything but relieved. Why hadn't she just said no? There was no future there. Maybe someday she could entertain the possibility of marriage but she didn't see how. There was no way she'd trust like that again. Especially someone like Ewan who made her breathless and confused.

And so vulnerable.

So why had she agreed to think about it? But she already knew the answer. Because he lit her blood on fire. She was to marry Lord

Davenport and he hadn't inspired anything even close to that. And while she'd found men handsome or appealing, it was nothing compared to how wanton she became at his touch. Which made him all the more dangerous.

She sighed. She couldn't risk it. He muddled her mind and she'd be too open to hurt. She'd tell him in the morning that she couldn't accept his courtship.

With her convictions strong, she fell asleep ready to stand firm the next day.

The bright morning sun further bolstered her spirits as she sat at

breakfast. Aunt Judith and Agnes decided to read in the garden to take advantage of the weather and she happily agreed to join them.

Ewan was giving her his penetrating stare, the one that made her shiver with desire, and sunshine seemed the best way to burn off the nighttime longings he inspired.

Ainsley and Emilia were plotting some adventure in the village. Clarissa now understood they were eavesdropping to make sure Colin hadn't given Fiona away. While Fiona had yet to come down, which was odd.

Uncle Haggis was at his usual position with the paper. "I know you and Fiona wanted to speak with me." He turned, grinning at Ewan. "It would seem she's already acting the part of a married lady. Sleeping in her bed all morning. Perhaps we can talk later."

Clarissa watched as Ewan's face tightened and he turned to Haggis to give a nod. Clarissa realized that Uncle Haggis wasn't likely to take the news well. He clearly thought Ewan and Fiona had made a match. Her nerves fluttered for him but she knew he could handle himself.

Then he looked back at her. "Since I've no meetin' this mornin', may I join you lasses in the garden?"

"That would lovely, Lord Dumfries," Aunt Judith smiled.

Clarissa's cheeks heated. Perhaps she'd been hasty in thinking that time in the garden would give her a break from wanton thoughts of Ewan.

Sitting on a bench with her aunt and cousin, she watched the muscles of his back work as he spread a blanket down in some grass. Then he sat atop it with his book in hand.

"Care to join me?" He turned to her, his eyes holding her hostage once again.

Aunt Judith clucked her tongue and muttered under her breath, "How Haggis can still think he's courting Fiona is beyond me. It's so

obvious where his interest lies.”

Clarissa warmed, her cheeks flaming at the words. Apparently it had been obvious to near everyone that Ewan had eyes for her and not Fiona. She'd have seen it sooner if her experience in London hadn't clouded her judgment. She supposed Uncle Haggis had his own reasons for missing the truth.

She stood from the bench and walked over to where he sat in the middle of the quilt. She picked a corner and sat, arranging her skirts.

“Why so far away, lass?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She nibbled on her lip. “You're dangerous, my lord.”

He gave her a wicked grin. “At this point, lass, call me Ewan.” He lounged back on the blanket, giving her even more space. “And here, in front of your aunt and cousin, I'm no danger to you.”

Oh but he was. He kept maneuvering past her defenses, his smile was doing it this very moment. Making her forget her promise to end any chance of a courtship.

Even now it whispered, *what is the harm in courting? He said you didn't have to make any promises.* And that was a dangerous thought. But she made light of it. “Rakes always find a way to compromise a lady.” She knew he wasn't a rake. But it was an easy defense now. Far easier than admitting her own fear of poor judgment.

Her resolve was weakening. With each passing hour, she grew more desperate to throw herself in his arms and forge the consequences.

He sat up again, his face going black. “Ye think I'm a rake? I'm nothing like the man who compromised you in London.”

Very true. Davenport ruined her without a single touch. Damaged goods because of rejection. Engaged couples were allowed time alone, it didn't matter they had never touched. But Ewan, he *had* touched her and made no promises yet. And was not just involving her pride but her heart.

“You're much worse.” She inched a little further away but he closed the distance between them coming as close as propriety allowed. She was trying so hard to be strong, to protect her heart but his nearness was making it hard to think.

“How can ye even say that?”

“Did you forget what happened in your room?” she whispered, her eyebrows rising to her hairline. How could he not know the effect he had on her? How she was losing her senses?

He had the decency to look abashed then. “But I've asked to court ye.”

“He courted me too,” she answered softly.

“Wait,” his face clouded with confusion. “Why didn't ye just marry him? Not that I'm advocating it. But if he ruined ye, and he was

courting...”

Her mouth was hanging open and he stopped, looking more confused still. He thought she'd actually been compromised. Of course, that's what most thought, but no one had told him that she'd broken the engagement and that meant, to society, she was a fallen woman. “It wasn't like—”

But she stopped because her Aunt Rhona came running into the courtyard, skirts held up in her hands. “Fiona is missing!”

Chapter 10

Ewan could have cursed aloud. He was worried about Fiona, of course. Though she was a lass with a penchant for fun and disregard for rules or safety. She'd likely taken herself on an adventure. But Haggis thought he and Fiona were still courting, and that did not bode well for him.

And Clarissa, she'd been about to tell him something important.

Standing, he held his hand down to Clarissa. "Should we start a search party?" he asked.

Lady Ravenscraig's hands fluttered to her cheeks. "I'm not sure, I don't know, I..."

"What's all the ruckus about?" Lord McDougal bellowed across the courtyard.

"Oh Haggis, it's Fiona. She's not in her room. No one's seen her. None of the servants or the girls. I've searched everywhere."

Haggis levelled him with a glare. "Lord Dumfries," he grated out.

Ewan stood straighter. "Yes, Lord Ravenscraig."

"Where is my daughter?"

"I don't ken." Crossing his arms over his chest. "But I can help ye look, if ye'd like."

Haggis glared at him for a few more minutes before finally giving his head a shake of agreement.

"Lady McDougal, where have ye looked exactly?" Ewan gave Haggis one more glare before he turned to his wife.

She rattled off a list of rooms in the house that included the attic and the root cellar. But nothing outside of the house.

He gave a nod. "Assemble the staff. Let's start with her favorite places. If that doesn't yield anything, we'll fan out."

Within a quarter hour, they'd assembled all able bodies and made a list. The lighthouse, the village, the barns, and the horse fields were where they would start.

Agnes, Emilia, and Kieran went to check the lighthouse, while Haggis and two servants went to the grazing pastures.

The aunts headed off to the village while Ewan and Clarissa made

for the barn. They walked silently side by side and Ewan was aware of her every movement while lost in his own thoughts. He wanted to court her but somehow, he couldn't untangle himself from Fiona. It was maddening.

"Ewan," Clarissa's voice trembled slightly.

"Aye, mo chridhe?" He rubbed his eyes.

Her hand fluttered to touch his arm. "You seem worried. Do you think Fiona's hurt?"

He swore under his breath. He honestly didn't think she was hurt but still, he should be thinking of her rather than himself. "I think she's fine but I am concerned about the repercussions of this day."

"Me too," she admitted softly. "Uncle Haggis thinks that you..."

He glanced over to see her face shadowed with worry. "I had nothing to do with Fiona's disappearance."

"Oh, I didn't think you did." She stopped, looking over at him. "Fiona would not be out of the house if you and she had been—" Her cheeks flamed pink. "But Uncle Haggis is suspicious and if he thinks you're responsible you'll have to leave and—"

He reached for her hand. "Ye want me to stay?"

Her mouth opened and closed several times before she finally answered. "Lord preserve me, I think I do." She took a breath and then the next words rushed out. "I promised myself that I would tell you no but I just can't. I'm not saying yes, but I can't say no either... I'm sorry to be so—"

"That's enough of a promise for now, lass." He pulled her a little closer. "I've just got to make sure yer uncle doesn't insist I marry yer cousin. I was trying to help the lass but I've landed in a right bit of trouble."

"She told me what you did for her. It was verra kind." Her body had moved closer and she was smiling up at him in a way that made him weak in the knees. When she spoke with a burr, he near lost his senses. His lips began drifting down to hers.

"Ye're out in the open, ye know?" Fiona called from the entrance of the barn. "Are you two just goin' around kissin' all the time?"

"Fiona McDougal," Clarissa stepped away from him hands on her hips. "Where have you bloody been?"

His blood heated even more as she chastised her cousin.

"What are ye talkin' about? I just got up early and headed out to the barn for a ride." Fiona's cheeks colored.

"Is that why ye're wearing the same dress as you were last night?" Clarissa stalked up to her. "It's fine if you want to get yourself into a whole pile of trouble but yer father thinks Ewan is responsible for you being gone."

"It's Ewan now, is it?" Fiona crossed her arms.

“You’d better go change right quick. And don’t let anyone see you because Ewan is done covering up for you. You have to tell Uncle Haggis today that you’re not getting married.”

Fiona huffed a breath, “And why is that?”

“Do you want to marry him? If you do, then pray, continue.” Clarissa gave her cousin a furious stare.

Ewan pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. It took a lot to win an argument with a Scottish woman but Clarissa was winning.

“Maybe I’ll just tell Da you want *Ewan* for yourself and that’s why I can’t marry him.” Fiona was near shouting now.

Clarissa stepped even closer, her voice rising to meet Fiona’s. “And maybe I’ll tell him that you snuck into the barn to meet Colin Campbell.”

He tried not to laugh. It wouldn’t help either of the angry women in front of him. But there was a little pleasure in seeing Clarissa put Fiona in her place. That little trickster needed it.

But she was getting her due now, because her skin had gone ash white under her freckles. “You wouldn’t.”

Clarissa was right in her face. “All this time, I was so worried I was taking something from you. But you have been trying to take something from me. You’re ruining *my* chance to play another one of *your* little tricks. Fiona McDougal, you’ll come clean this instant or—“

“It’s a chance, is it?” he grinned calling over them.

“That isn’t...I mean it’s not...I didn’t...”

He approached them both. “It’s all right, lass. But don’t be too hard on Fiona. I’d likely left days ago if it wasn’t for what she said to Colin.” Putting his arm around Clarissa’s waist he whispered. “Help Fiona get into a riding habit quick. She went for a morning ride. Nothing more. Needed to clear her head because she’s decided she just can’t marry me.” He winked. “Now go, both of ye and make it quick.”



Clarissa’s feet flew down the lane to the castle as she and Fiona kept a sharp eye for any family or staff. Sneaking into the back door, they ducked into a broom closet as one of the maids came down the stairs and into the kitchen. Then they scampered up the servants’ stairs.

“Where is the habit?” Clarissa asked breathlessly, as she helped Fiona unbutton her dress. There was straw sticking to every part of

her underclothing. Even in the strings of her corset. It must have been terribly uncomfortable.

Fiona raced to the wardrobe and pulled out an emerald green habit, crossing back to Clarissa. Clarissa stuck her arm up though it and hoisted it over Fiona's head, allowing the fabric to fall into place. Twisting her cousin around, she began doing up the buttons in the back. "Are you...are you ruined?" It was none of her business but she couldn't stop the words from tumbling out.

"Nae," Fiona answered softly. "Swear you won't tell?"

"Of course," Clarissa said. "I know what I said earlier about telling your father but the truth is, you can tell me anything."

Fiona nodded. "You can tell me anything too." She took a breath. "I wasn't ruined, in the strictest sense of the word, but we did things..." Fiona's face flushed bright red.

"I understand." Clarissa gave her hand a squeeze. "I was ruined in London for having nothing other than bad judgment. And here in Scotland, I've done things that would actually ruin me, but we'll keep each other's secrets."

Fiona sighed. "Ewan wants to marry you."

Clarissa wrinkled her nose. "I'm English, remember?" But Fiona's words filled her with warmth and hope. Somehow, today when she'd thought she'd really lost him to Fiona, a decision had been made. She couldn't let him go. She needed to at least consider this.

"Aye, and Scot too. He sees that now, I think." Fiona looked away, her face clouding. "But I don't know how Colin feels about me. I thought he hated me."

"Isn't it so strange?" Clarissa asked. "I was sure I hated Ewan. Right up to the point he kissed me and then I stopped thinking all together." She finished the last button. Then pulling several pieces of straw out of Fiona's hair. "You're ready to go."

Fiona nodded. "Meet me in the entry in five minutes. Don't take too long. Da is going to be furious."

"I won't." Clarissa gave her a quick hug. "Good luck."

"I'll be needin' it." Fiona swept out of the room.

Clarissa waited for no more than a minute and then raced back toward the barn to find Ewan. They'd come in together as though they hadn't seen Fiona at all.

Racing down the path to the barn from the kitchen door, Ewan met her, sweeping her up into his arms. She let him, pressing her body close to his as her arms wrapped around his neck. "Were you seen?" he mumbled, as he pulled her behind an outbuilding.

"No," she whispered as she pressed closer. "I told Fiona I'd meet her in just a few minutes. I think she's worried how Uncle Haggis will react."

He nodded, kissing her temple. "I just want to hold ye for a moment, lass, and then we'll go in." There was just a touch of sadness to his voice.

"What's wrong?" she asked pulling back.

But he shook his head holding her closer. "Nothing yet."

"But you're afraid something will be."

His hand traveled into her hair and his lips whispered over her ear. "If Haggis sends me away, all you need do is send me a letter and I'll come for ye."

She gasped. Her uncle wouldn't really send him away, would he?

Chapter 11

But Ewan had the right of it. Before they'd even reached the house, they could hear Haggis' booming voice yelling at full volume. Apparently, he was already back from searching the pasture.

And as they moved inside, Clarissa could clearly see Haggis standing, larger than life, in the entry of the castle. Fiona seemed to be doing her best to keep her shoulders straight but her face was crumpling under her father's words. "You're marryin' now, young lady. I've had enough of your nonsense. It's time for some other man to try his hand at taming ye, because I'm done."

It became clear that Fiona had mentioned Ewan because as soon as he and Clarissa stepped through the door, Haggis pointed his finger at Ewan and said, "You!"

Ewan stood straighter. "Me," he rumbled back. His gaze narrowing.

"I want to see both of ye in my study now." Haggis turned on his heel and headed up the stairs, expecting Fiona and Ewan to follow.

Fiona raced over. "I only told 'im that I'd decided not to marry ye. But he kept asking why in a louder and louder voice. I lost my temper and said that you were only pretendin' because of what I'd said to Colin. That's when the real yellin' started. I'm so sorry, Ewan. I've been nothing but trouble to ye."

Ewan waved his hand. "I've fought entire armies. I'm sure I can handle one angry father. But let's get it over with, shall we?"

"Thank you, Ewan," Fiona breathed. "You're a gentleman and an honorable man and I'm glad to ken ye."

With a nod, he turned to her. "Wait for me in the library." Then he placed a quick kiss on her forehead. He started up the stairs.

Fiona turned to her and gave her hand a squeeze. "I ken ye've been hurt. But he's a fine man, you'll never find one finer. Don't let Davenport ruin your chance at happiness." Then Fiona dashed up the stairs behind Ewan.

Clarissa watched them go, her heart thudding in her chest. Aunt Judith, Agnes, Fiona—they all thought Ewan was the kind of man she

should be with. Mayhap, they were correct. She needed more time, and time was suddenly running short. But how could she trust again so soon after being scorched by marriage?



Ewan stood as straight as a man more than six feet could as he walked into Haggis' office. He'd let this get out of hand and he had no idea how fix this mess he was in. Because he had to stay to court Clarissa. She was trying like the devil to keep her walls up but he was chipping them away stone by stone.

When he didn't want to growl in frustration, he had to admit that it was damn fun, chasing a woman like this. He was alive in ways he hadn't been in years. And he realized he was in love. He wasn't sure when or how it happened but he was. Irrevocably in love with an English lady who had a Scot temper. She was glorious.

Even this, being called to Haggis' study, felt like living. Later, after he made Fiona pay for all of this, he'd thank her for helping him find himself again.

He sat in the chair across from Haggis and Fiona took the seat next to him. "What have you got to say for yourself?" Haggis was looking directly at him, there was no mistaking who he was talking to.

He blinked twice. He didn't have anything to say at all. As far as Haggis knew, anyway. But he couldn't very well blurt that out. "I'm sorry?"

"Damn right you are!" Haggis roared. "Pretending to court my daughter all the while making eyes at my niece."

Oh, well, there was that. He cleared his throat, trying to present some reasonable explanation.

But before he could, Fiona broke in. "I already told ye, we don't want to marry. Never did. He was just trying to help me—"

"He wasn't helping you, he was giving himself more time with Clarissa," Haggis fired back.

Fiona looked at him quickly in question but then she answered. "That's not true. It was only the second day. He and Clarissa had barely spoken. You can't take away honorable actions, Da."

Haggis tossed his hands in the air, but didn't respond. He simply glared at Ewan, then at Fiona.

Ewan sat silently under Haggis' accusing gaze. He wouldn't cower but he'd not provoke the other man.

Finally Haggis spoke. "Fiona, in a few weeks I am to attend a meeting of lairds. We are to discuss the use of land and other issues facing our region. You will be in attendance with me and you will leave with a name or names of men you are interested in pursuing."

"What?" Fiona's voice trembled.

"You heard me, lass. Ye're near twenty years old. It's time. I tried to be reasonable but ye've given me no choice. If ye don't pick, I'll choose for ye and it will be done." He waved toward the door, dismissing Fiona.

Ewan's stomach gave a little jolt. Haggis was not a man to trifle with under normal circumstances. But if he were that harsh with Fiona...

"Have you noticed we both still call ourselves McDougal?" Haggis' eyes swung to him. "In England, I'm Ravenscraig and you are Dumfries. But here we're McDougal because that should mean something. I trusted ye in my home because your kin is my kin, your clan tied to mine."

"Haggis," he started out but Haggis cut him off.

"Fiona is a fine woman, unruly, but a true Scot. She'd have made you an excellent bride. I don't know why—"

"I fell in love." Ewan looked him in the eye, because the truth meant something. And in this moment he realized the depth of feeling he had for Clarissa. "I didn't want to. I blamed the English for dragging me off to a war I didn't care about. The last thing I wanted was an English bride but..." He took a deep breath. "I love Clarissa."

Glaring at him across the desk, the old laird gritted out, "You were here to court Fiona."

"I know. But Fiona isn't interested in me any more than I am in her." He shrugged, hoping that Haggis would understand. "She's a fine woman and she'll make some man a fine—"

"I don't want your platitudes," Haggis practically spit. "I'm not getting any younger. I've been having these pains, ye ken? And my daughters, they need to be married because I dinna have an heir."

Ewan's hands raked through his hair. He couldn't blame Haggis one bit. He wanted to make sure his daughters were properly settled. "Who inherits?"

"My nephew, Ulrich. He's a good enough boy, but he'd use a hacksaw to do a needle's job, ye ken? I don't trust him to provide for the girls' future."

"I can help, if ye'd like. With the girls. I know it isn't the help you wanted but..."

Haggis eyed him over the desk. "If I die before they're married, will ye see the job done? I'll take care of Fiona, she's the hardest. Emilia is no trouble at all. Ainsley, she's spirited, but men already

delight in her company. She's got this way about her."

Ewan tried not to grimace. He didn't want to help the girls find husbands. But then again, being with this family was bringing him back to life. And Haggis was likely fine. "You'd trust me with yer daughters? Are ye sure?"

The other man nodded. "Ye did a good turn for Fiona, keeping her reputation untarnished. And you'll be good for Clarissa. She needs ye, even if she's not ready to admit it."

"That means a great deal—" but a cry echoed through the old stony castle and it had him on his feet in a second. He didn't know how he knew, but it was Clarissa who'd made the mournful sound. He was sure of it.

"Go son, I'll catch up," Haggis bellowed and Ewan didn't even stop to look before he raced out the door.



The note she'd been holding slipped from Clarissa's hand as the cry rent her lips. She hadn't meant to make that sound out loud.

It was just so absolutely awful that she didn't know what else to do. The butler stared at her as though she'd lost her mind.

Her eyes cast down at the paper as if it might bite her if she took her eyes from it.

A hand gently touched her back. "What is it, lass?" Ewan's gentle voice washed over her and relaxed her muscles enough for her to point toward the note on the floor. She wanted to curl into him and seek shelter in his strength and heat.

He picked it up and scanned the contents, his serious face growing darker with each passing word. "Like bloody hell," he growled as he finished reading the letter.

"What am I going to do?" she shuddered. Just today she'd thought she was done grieving and was now healing. A future was emerging from the mist of grief and with a few words on paper, a new beginning disappeared again.

"What do you want to do?" His voice was quiet, soothing, and more importantly, it was the first time anyone had asked her that question. She relaxed further taking several deep, cleansing breaths. Her heart swelled at his kindness, his understanding that this was her life and her decision to make.

"I never want to see *him* again," she answered first.

“That is going to be a wee bit difficult, but it can be arranged, if it’s what ye really want.” He hesitated searching her face. His mouth open and shut as though there were more he wanted to say but he didn’t. Instead he waited for her.

Giving him a grin, she reached for his hand. She knew he wanted to tell her not to run but he didn’t. Her parents loved her but they never trusted her to decide for herself. Another reason she was angry. They’d chosen a husband and they’d chosen wrong. And she’d just let it all happen. “You’d really do that? You’d help me run away again?”

Her heart swelled as she looked in his eyes, some of her fear at giving her heart melting away. Ewan was forever rushing in to rescue her as only a hero could.

His eyes crinkled in a grin. “It wouldn’t be so much running away as it would be running to... you’d be running to me lass, and to our future.”

Her eyebrows raised even as her lips parted in a smile. But her other hand came to his. “And if I don’t run away? If I stay and tell him that I’d rather die a ruined spinster than look at his face ever again in my life?”

“Then I’ll stay with ye, lass. And I’ll help ye be strong. But you have to keep your promise to let me court ye after. Ye might decide to be a spinster still but I want that chance.”

She nodded her agreement and, to her complete amazement, a light happiness she hadn’t felt in weeks spread through her body. She was happy even though her mother had written to tell her that Lord Davenport was on his way to Scotland this very moment.

She was happy because Ewan was going to first help her stand up to him and then he was going to court her and she might even marry him or she might not. But for the first time in her life, the choice was hers.

No wonder she’d been so angry with herself. It wasn’t just that Lord Davenport had humiliated her, it was that her parents had set it all up. It had felt like a betrayal. She’d allowed it to happen too. Swept up in the excitement of marrying a marquess. Ridiculous.

Then she’d run away to Scotland. But Haggis had been right, it was time to stop. She squeezed Ewan’s hand and stared into those deep green eyes. Did people really gain their independence by beginning a relationship? She did. Thanks to Ewan. He asked her what she wanted and gave her room to make choices.

She wanted to kiss him. But her uncle was coming down the stairs and the butler was still staring at them. But she had just realized the Ewan might just be the perfect man for her. He was bringing out the part of her she’d felt deep inside. The piece that was strong, independent, and fought for what she wanted.

“What the devil is goin’ on?” Haggis bellowed as he came down the steps. He looked tired.

The butler stepped forward, holding up his silver tray. For the first time, Clarissa noticed there was a second letter.

Her uncle reached the bottom of the steps and plucked the letter off the tray. He ripped it open and began reading. His eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. “Your mother has been corrupted by your egotism of a father.”

She nodded. “In this case, I have to agree.”

“Did you read your entire letter, lass?” Ewan flipped it over.

“No, I only read the first paragraph.” She released his hand to take the paper and then unfolded it.

Dearest Clarissa,

Your father has granted permission to Lord Davenport to visit you at your aunt and uncle’s house in Scotland. Your father fancies that this was all a misunderstanding and that if the match is given a chance, could still work. At the very least, Lord Davenport would like the opportunity to apologize and try to make amends.

We will also be joining you as soon as we can. But until we get there, you must be strong. I’ve seen it in you, you’ve got real Scottish spirit. I know we’ve sheltered you beyond what we should have, and that you’re suffering from it now. I’m sorry I didn’t better prepare you for this moment but it’s time to stand up, my love.

Your aunts, uncle, and cousins will help you. But you must decide what you want and then you must stand firm. If Davenport is your heart’s desire then so be it. But if not, then it’s your time to be strong.

I will see you very soon.

Your loving Mother

Clarissa read it twice through and then a third just for good measure. “She thinks I’m strong.” She hadn’t been acting that way for

the past month. But it was time to face what had happened. She looked in Ewan's eyes, her head tilting up. She wanted to throw herself in his arms, but she couldn't now.

"Not many lasses stand in the rain helping to fix a wheel." His fingers brushed hers again. "Or sing a man through a thunderstorm." He gave her a soft grin. "Or play the pianoforte 'til everyone in the room is brought to tears." Then, in front of her uncle, he leaned down and brushed his lips over her forehead. "I know ye're strong and spirited. Ye can do this."

"Ye can," Uncle Haggis added quietly, for him anyway. "I'm glad ye're no' runnin' lass. Adressin' your past will help ye embrace the future."

She smiled, a grin that spread from ear to ear. "I agree." With her family around her, she would bravely face the man who had wronged her and then she could turn to the future.

Chapter 12

Three days later, in the midst of a steady drizzle that suited her mood perfectly, Clarissa watched as a gilded white carriage, one she'd recognize anywhere, travelled up the long drive toward her uncle's castle.

Her family was all gathered around her, as were Ewan and Keiran.

Ewan gave a low whistle. "That's some carriage," Ewan's tone was begrudgingly appreciative. "Rich and titled. No wonder your father wanted him to marry ye."

"Not rich," Clarissa shook her head to emphasize her point. "He's come to grovel, but not because he wants me." Bitterness like bile filled her mouth. Ruined without even being touched. Now she was acutely aware of how a man who wanted her acted and she knew Davenport never had been interested in her. Only her dowry.

"What do you mean?" Ewan's voice had an edge that she didn't understand.

"He's spent all his money on pretty carriages and lavish parties. Gambling and women too, if the rumors are correct." She hadn't looked at Ewan yet, her eyes focused on the carriage and six coming up the drive. But one hand reached for him, as her other hand rested against the glass. She leaned her forehead closer to its rain-spattered surface. She wanted to see him, before he saw her. It would help her face him. "He needs an infusion of coin or he'll have to start selling all his pretty things."

"And he'll get that money by marryin' you?" Ewan had stepped closer and his hand had come to her waist. She relaxed at his touch, their bond growing stronger with each passing day, though they hadn't discussed marriage again. They were developing a relationship.

"Yes." She pressed her cheek to the cool paned surface, watching as a footman jumped down from his seat to open the door.

"I told her to tell ye she had a fat dowry, but she's stubborn," Fiona groused good-naturedly.

Agnes leaned over to him, "They whisper among the *ton* that it's the biggest in all—"

“Agnes,” Clarissa chastised. Her eyes were glued to the man stepping out of the carriage. Her heart beating wildly, she squeezed Ewan’s hand tighter. It was firm and warm in her grasp.

“Well, they do. Is it? The largest dowry in all of England?”

Clarissa waved her hand dismissively then rested it back on the glass. “Don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t gone around asking all the heiresses in London about their dowries. It just isn’t done.”

“I wish you’d told me sooner, lass,” Ewan’s quiet voice was strained and tight.

She turned then. “Why? Does it change the way you feel about me? Wanting to court me?” In her mind, she screamed, *I can’t do this without you. Please don’t leave me to face this alone.*

“Of course not.” He pulled her into a rough hug in front of her entire family. “But it changes how we deal with him. I didn’t realize he’d be so desperate. Perhaps we should have run after all.”

“Too late,” she whispered, her heart more full than she could have imagined possible. With Ewan by her side, she could do anything. Even face Davenport.



The way she was smiling up at him, it made his breath catch like a feckin’ woman. But there was a light shining through her eyes he’d never seen before and it nearly made his head spin. He knew he was in love with her but when she looked at him like that, he could dare to hope that she loved him too.

Yes, he wanted to help her overcome her past, but it was workin’ on ‘im too. His life had color that had been missin’ for a verra long time.

If Davenport, that feckin’ egotist, thought that he was taking Clarissa away from him, well...he was sorely mistaken.

The front door swung open, creaking as it went, and the family rose, knowing it was time to assemble in the entry.

Haggis went first followed by the aunts and then Fiona and her sisters. Clarissa was next and Ewan fell in just behind her with Keiran at the very back. He turned to Kieran and gave him a long stare.

Keiran gave a nod in return to show that he understood. This was war and he’d best be ready to do battle.

The Marquess of Davenport did not have a clue what he was up against but this was Ewan’s home country and that dandy of a lord

with his fancy carriage was about to face a soldier who'd just risen from the muck of war.

Squaring his shoulders he fought the urge to grab Clarissa around the waist and carry her off to the nearest church for a weddin'. Only his promise to give her the choice held him back because that primal Scot that lived inside was clawing to take over and take his woman before this man could even look at her.

But he held firm and kept his hands at his sides even as they twitched to wrap around Clarissa's waist.

Davenport walked through the door, shaking off his riding cloak and handing the wet garment to a valet.

Ewan almost barked with laughter. Slender and fair, the man was almost womanish. Ewan thought he'd be meeting an opponent. One good Scottish wind should blow this horse's arse back to England. He heard Clarissa swallow, and looking over at her saw that she had paled considerably, her eyes wide with fear. He murmured some inane words of comfort, inching closer so that his shoulder was just behind hers as they stood in line. Davenport's eyes swung to him, giving him the once over. He stood straighter, looking down on the man who was surely a foot shorter than himself.

Introductions began and Ewan forced himself to remain still as Davenport bent over Clarissa's gloved hand. "My love," he murmured, as he made to kiss the gloved skin. Ewan jolted at the endearment. Those were words for him alone to say to Clarissa.

She took a half step back, as though to retreat, and bumped against him.

One corner of his mouth drew up at the contact, a physical reminder of her preference. His hand came to the small of her back to further settle her.

The three of them were mere inches apart and the room crackled with anticipation. Davenport still held her hand, while Ewan kept his fingers and palm on her back.

"What brings you to Scotland?" she asked Davenport, clearing her throat.

"You, of course." He gave her a wide practiced smile. "I was miserable without you."

She sniffed. "I was miserable because of you." Then she withdrew her hand from his. "You've come a long way for nothing." Then her shoulders straightened. "I'm already engaged, to Lord Dumfries."

Ewan quirked one eyebrow, a happy grin sliding his lips apart. It was his second fake engagement in a fortnight.

Chapter 13

Uncle Haggis paced in front of her. “What possessed you to go and say that?” His voice boomed in its usual way.

Clarissa shrugged. “It just fell from my lips. He looked so smug and I just wanted to wipe that smarmy expression off his face.” She turned to Fiona. “It was so satisfying.”

Fiona winked in return. The family had retreated to the sitting room while Lord Davenport rested from his travels.

Emilia looked less convinced. “But Fiona almost had to marry Ewan so as not to be ruined.”

Clarissa waved her hand. “I’m already ruined. It makes no difference now.”

“Or we could just get married,” Ewan rumbled from the corner.

Excitement swelled in her chest but she pushed it back down and shook her head. “We’re only courting, remember? I won’t marry for my reputation.” She meant it. More and more, she could see that Ewan was her future but she wouldn’t rush the decision for the sake of society.

“But you could be saved,” Agnes pointed out.

Clarissa stood then and crossed back to the window. Her heart was hammering in her chest but it wasn’t fear this time. It was something different entirely. Excitement, power, love. “Saved from what?” She turned to them again. “I don’t care what they think and I’ll likely never go back anyway. And I’m not running anymore.”

Ainsley shrugged. “Then why did you tell him you were engaged? You should have just told him to fe—”

“Ainsley McDougal,” Haggis growled.

Clarissa nodded. “Ainsley’s right. I will tell him that I just don’t want him to know that I’m not actually engaged.” In a way she was running again, but in her defense, she couldn’t get marriage to Ewan out of her mind. She thought his words, *running to their future*.

Ewan’s voice was low and menacing. “No, lass. Tell him you don’t want him. Tell him you hate the very air he breathes. But also tell that dandy that your very large, very war-hardened fiancé will use every

bloody torture maneuver he learned on the battlefield to break all the bones in his tiny little body if he dares to show his face in Scotland again.”

She grinned. “I thought I was supposed to be standing up for myself.”

“With my help,” he added, his eyebrows raising as though that should have been completely obvious.

Her smile spread wider. The idea had real merit.

That evening’s dinner was significantly less painful than Clarissa thought it might be. Davenport was ridiculously attentive though his eyes kept drifting to Ewan, who stared daggers at the marquess the entire evening.

Clearly, her former fiancé had no idea what to do with a new fiancée and seemed to be ignoring the fact entirely, opting instead to try to make amends with Clarissa.

Though attentive, Davenport had always looked through her rather than at her. Until now, she hadn’t realized how much that had undermined her confidence. To always be trying to hold the attention of the man who would be the most important in her life.

By contrast, Ewan was aware of her every move, cushioned every fall. Now it was her turn to barely pay attention to Davenport. Her body hummed with a need she hadn’t thought possible and it was all for her laird.

And her eyes clearly showed where her attention lay, because she could hardly peel them away from Ewan.

“The season has been so dull without you, my love,” Davenport sighed.

“Did London run out of maids?” Fiona asked as she took a bite of her meat pie.

Aunt Rhona gasped, “I’ll send ye to yer room.”

Davenport had the decency to turn a bright shade of red. Too her amazement, Clarissa did not feel the slightest twinge of sadness or shame. Instead she had to hold back a laugh.

But then the marquess straightened his shoulders. She had to give him credit, he knew that her entire family was aware of what he’d done and he still sat at their table. It took some kind of bravery to endure that.

Clearing his throat he looked to Ewan then back at her. “When last I spoke to your father, he wasn’t aware you were engaged again.”

That stilled Clarissa’s fork. At twenty, she still couldn’t marry

without his permission. Did she lie again? Give some version of the truth? Ignore him altogether?

But Haggis spoke. "As her next male kin, I've agreed to the match by proxy."

Davenport looked puzzled. "It is his decision to make."

"It is not. It's mine." Clarissa, having managed to untie her tongue, gave him a glare.

"Not by English law—"

"We're not in England." Her voice was soft but determined. For many reasons those rules didn't apply. First, because she didn't care about them any longer and second because she was fairly certain, as Ewan hadn't known about her dowry 'til today, his offer to court was not tied to receiving the coin. In Scotland they were free to marry. Her father's only play would be to withhold the dowry, but Ewan wouldn't care about that. Would he?

"Thanks be to God for that," Ainsley added.

Davenport pursed his lips but remained quiet, for which Clarissa was grateful.

As the party moved to the music room, however, it was clear that he hadn't given up. As she walked up the stairs, he caught up to her. "Please hear me out," he whispered frantically. "We could be happy together, Clarissa. I know I made a mistake, but if you could find it in your heart to give me another—" He ended the last word with a whoosh of breath and then stumbled on the steps.

"Excuse me, Lord Davenport," Ewan's rough voice sounded anything but sincere.

Davenport smoothed his cravat. "Of course, Lord Dumfries," his icy voice bit out.

But he remained silent as her cousins entertained them with the pianoforte. But his eyes wondered to her often, try as she might to ignore him.

Ewan was also quiet, but tense as a strung bow. At one point he leaned down and whispered into her ear, "I canna wait to toss him out on his arse."

The feel of his breath on her ear sent shivers racing down her spine and she leaned closer giving him a glowing smile. "Me either," she whispered back.

Having an ally had turned this dreaded event to an almost amusing evening. Subtly, she reached over to touch Ewan's hand and he clasped her fingers. "I won't let him hurt you, lass. I swear it."

She believed him. And the protective circle he'd created around her made her desire him all the more.

Chapter 14

Clarissa paced her room, unable to sleep. She'd thought that Lord

Davenport's presence would remind her of all her past hurts. But nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, his visit had amplified her feelings for Ewan.

His strength and protectiveness had wrapped around her like a warm blanket. And the desire, it was a raging inferno that made her ache with longing. Every subtle touch, every protective maneuver stoking the flames.

She bit her lip. She'd agreed to courting, but that could be weeks, even months. Then there was engagement. The season had been about to begin in London and a wedding was to be at the end. It might take a year for her and Ewan to marry, if she agreed to marry him at all.

And, he'd likely have to return home at some point, meaning they'd be separated. Her heart ached at the thought.

She didn't want to think any more about what might happen or how she might be hurt. She just wanted to feel Ewan's strong arms about her again.

Putting on her dressing rob, she creaked open her door. Without a real plan in mind, she started down the hall toward Ewan's room.

Every creak made her jump, afraid she would be caught. But those little thrills made her want to laugh out loud. Finally, if caught, she would be ruined for actually doing something.

She reached Ewan's door and it was silent within. She bit her lip. What if she knocked and he didn't answer? What if she woke up someone else?

Screwing up her courage, she gave a tap on the door and then softly called, "Ewan."

In mere seconds he yanked open the door and pulled her in. He was shirtless and his kilt was twisted around to the side but before she could even ask, his lips were on hers.

Kissing her over and over, his tongue plundered her mouth. She groaned in delight and then snaked her hands around his neck and into his overlong hair. She'd grown quite fond of it, she realized with

a giggle.

"What's so funny?" he asked as his hand brushed open her dressing gown, his hands circling her waist.

"Your hair." She laughed again. "I thought it was rather rakish, but it turns out, I quite like it."

"It isn't rakish," he growled out. "Davenport's perfectly trimmed hair is rakish. He spends all his time grooming himself and buying pretty things. I spend my time tilling fields and repairing crofters. I haven't time to trim me hair."

"Oh," she lay her head on his chest. "No wonder I like it so much." She lifted it again and bit her lip as she looked at him. "So you're not a rake after all?"

"Only with ye..." he muttered, capturing her lips again. "Ye bring out a side of me I thought long gone."

"You make me feel things I didn't even know were possible," she replied, breathless from the wanting.

Lifting her, he pressed his hand into her behind, holding her up as he massaged the flesh. She wrapped her legs around his waist and immediately the ache between her legs intensified as he pressed his manhood against her sensitive nub.

She groaned again her head tossing back, and his hands ran from her shoulder to her buttocks and back again as though memorizing her curves. How had she become so wanton so quickly?

"Lass." His ragged voice penetrated her haze of passion. "I don't think I can stand the wanting again. As glorious as it is to see ye finish."

Her lips found his and she kissed him with every ounce of her passion and longing. "I want it all."

He looked tortured as his hand grabbed her derriere and pressed her closer. They both moaned at the contact. "Are ye sure, mo chridhe?"

"I'm already ruined, Ewan." She gasped as one of his hands travelled up her side and skimmed her breast.

He gave her a curious look. "What's strange to me is that there's no passion between you and Davenport. How did he convince ye to—"

But she didn't want to talk and so she kissed him to stop his words. She'd explain later.

This time there were no rules about beds or clothes and so he carried her over to the mattress and lay her down, moving with her so their bodies were still pressed together.

"Oh my," she breathed out. "I'd thought I'd miss standing, but that is so delicious." He began trailing kisses down her neck, rubbing against her most sensitive flesh and using his hands to slowly lift the hem of her night rail.

Once the fabric cleared her hips, she sat up and he pulled it off in one clean motion. She hadn't a thing on underneath and now she lay naked before him. She'd wanted this and she wouldn't be shy now, but part of her was insecure to be so exposed.

His hand trailed lightly down the middle of her chest, running between her breasts. "You're stunning, mo chridhe. Better than I imagined."

And then he was on top of her again, his lips pressed to hers, then sliding lower to capture first one breast and then the other. Her breathing was ragged as she arched and moaned and writhed with the need building inside of her. His fingers began to lightly brush her sensitive folds. Pleasure was making her dizzy with desire as she held onto his back, grinding closer. "Please," she begged for a release she knew he could give.

"With pleasure, mo chridhe." And then his kilt was gone and his manhood was pressed against her opening. In a swift move, he pushed past her defenses but she hadn't expected it to hurt so much and she cried out.

Hands that had been holding him close began pushing him away as pain exploded in a tearing, ripping feeling.

"What in the bloody hell." He grimaced and pulled out of her.

She sighed with relief as the pain subsided. "Is it always like that?" she asked.

Ewan stood up and grabbed his kilt yanking it on. The lines of his back taut with anger. "I thought you already knew the answer to that." His clipped tone rigid with anger as he stomped to the window.

All at once, she realized he had thought she'd actually been compromised. "Ewan," she gasped. "I was ruined. Just like Fiona would have been. But we never actually... mean I didn't want to...but of course if we'd married we would have... That is to say, he never inspired the passion that you do. I never imagined in my life to feel the way I do when I am with you."

She saw him soften. "I would have done it differently if I had known, and most likely not 'til we were married."

Marriage was a conversation for tomorrow, now she just wanted to touch him, be touched. "We have now. Show me how it can be." She propped her herself up on one elbow and beckoned for him to return to the bed. Even in the moonlight, she swore his eyes darkened with desire.

He moved slowly back toward her until he was standing above her, the moonlight at his back. It highlighted how large a man he was. Her body ached again, but with anticipation rather than pain. "Show me," she repeated.

His kilt dropped to the floor and now she could see why it hurt so

much. He was amazingly large even down there in a way that frightened and excited her. She licked her lips and she heard his soft groan. "I can't take much more, lass."

Then he was on top of her. His hands were everywhere, stroking, rubbing, building her passion. And then his finger slipped inside her and it didn't hurt at all. In fact, it was delicious and her hips began a slow rotation to wring every ounce of pleasure from the digit.

When he removed the finger, she made to protest but he silenced her with a kiss and then the tip of him was slowly, carefully pushing her open. As he inched inside, she stretched, and while there was a small amount of pain, it was tolerable, and to her surprise it mixed with a rather pleasurable pressure that only increased the further he slid inside of her.

"Are ye all right?" his strained whisper rasped in her ear.

"Yes, oh yes," she breathed.

That was all the encouragement he seemed to need to slide out and then back in. To her immense surprise it was so satisfying that she longed for him to do it again. Which he did, over and over till they were climbing to impossible heights. She held his neck, her nails digging in 'til she couldn't stand it and in another second and they were raking down his skin as she fell over the edge.

Even as she shuddered and moaned, his climax roared through him and his spasms melded with her own.



Ewan looked down at the woman in his arms. Stunning. How could she have been so passionate and never been with a man? It didn't matter, he supposed. She'd been with him now and in his mind that meant they were marrying.

He'd promised Clarissa time to heal and to sort out her feelings and he would try to be patient. It had taken war, and a deep yearning for home, to make him want a family.

He could see all the signs. She'd been overprotected. Her parents making every decision and now she wanted independence. A chance to make her own choices. Somehow he'd have to figure out a way to make marriage her idea.

But for now, he was going to secret her away into his bed every chance he got. He'd have to be more careful to keep her from getting pregnant. She needed time, and he'd give her that. Provided he could

get rid of Davenport. That man was a plague upon them all.

How could the man not see what a jewel he might have had if he'd been a little more careful? And he wasn't talking about her dowry. Now that he'd had her, he didn't care about the money at all though he'd set out to marry a woman of means. But he'd found something far more valuable. A woman who eased the ache and made him feel alive again. He'd figure out the rest as it came. The important part was he loved her.

"Clarissa," he rasped as he moved to the side and pulled her body close to his. She was already falling asleep. "How long do we have 'til you'll be missed in your room?"

"Mmmm," she roused herself giving him a sleepy smile. "Not for hours." Then she snuggled closer to him. "Can I stay for a little while?" she asked even as she began drifting to sleep.

"You can stay forever," he whispered back. Then he closed his eyes and pressed her closer. He made a vow to himself, he'd do everything in his power to see that she did.

Chapter 15

Just before dawn, Clarissa became aware of a rocking motion. She wondered briefly if she was on a ship but then realized Ewan was carrying her down the hall, yet again.

Somehow, she was in her night rail and robe. He gave her a soft smile as her eyes fluttered open. "Good mornin', my sleepy little pixie."

"Pixie?" she grinned.

"I guess I only thought it to myself but ye're magical and always flitting away from me." His grin spread.

She had done a fair bit of pushing away. "Were you a hunter before the war?" she whispered.

"Aye, lass." His eyebrows raised in question.

"Then you weren't put off by having to chase me a little?" She bit her lip to keep the grin from spreading too wide.

He gave a soft chuckle. "I rather enjoyed it. But now, I find I'd rather have you caught firmly in my bed."

Her body heated at the thought of being in his bed again. "Oh, I like that idea."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself up to kiss the skin just below his ear. She felt him shiver at the touch. "Do you like it enough to come back to Castle Dumfries with me, lass? I can't be gone for too much longer. My people need me."

"How would I do that?" she asked tilting her head back to look at him.

He gave her a knowing grin. "Let's see if we can come up with a plan, shall we?"

She gave a nod and reaching her door, he set her down. Kissing her softly on the lips, he whispered, "I'll see you in a few hours." And then he was gone.

Happiness had her practically floating into her room. She snuggled down into the bed, remembering every touch from the night before.

He was right. She had to find a way to be with him because she did not want this to end.

Still grinning, she went to breakfast already planning her escape to Ewan's room that night. But she stopped, standing stone-still at the top of the stairs. Her parents stood in the entry.

It was as though she'd been dipped into the cold ocean. At once she realized it hadn't just been London she'd run from but her father as well. She was angry at him for his part in this and afraid of what he still wanted from her.

Her father looked up to see her standing atop the stairs. "Clarissa," he called smoothly.

Her mother turned and raced up the steps to greet her. "My lamb," she shouted as she lifted her skirts to clear the steps.

"Mama," she choked as she opened her arms to her mother. Her mother stepped into her embrace and wrapped her arms around her. It was at once comforting and disconcerting because her parents' presence changed both her relationship with Ewan and her interactions with Davenport.

Her father followed her mother and wrapped his arms around them both. "We've missed you while you've been away." The smoothness in his voice was gone, replaced with a rougher quality, almost as though he were near tears.

"I've missed you too," she replied, then pulled out of the embrace. She loved her parents and she knew they wanted what was best for her. But they were not in agreement as to what that might be. She still ached from their part in her humiliation.

In addition, she'd announced she was engaged to Ewan. She couldn't tell them she'd made it up, he hadn't actually proposed. Maybe she wouldn't have to. She and Ewan were most certainly moving toward a future. Would her father demand she break her ties with Ewan? Force her to comply? Nerves fluttered in her chest.

"Did my letter arrive?" her mother searched her face as she asked.

"Yes, as did the additional guest." Her face pinched.

Her father stepped closer. "Has he spoken to you? Apologized?"

"He's tried," she answered evasively.

"Clarissa," her father's voice held a note of warning. "You should at least listen. There isn't a better match for you in all of England. He's a marquess—"

"And a rake," she never interrupted her father but her voice cut through his like a hot knife through butter. "Mama, would you put up with such behavior?"

"No, never," her mother answered.

"Papa, it was at our engagement ball. That is a man with no scruples. You will have to drag me to the altar. Even with a knife to my throat, I wouldn't say the vows." Her back straightened with every word. Uncle Haggis was right. No more running, it was time to make a

stand.

Besides, she knew what it felt like to truly care. And now that she had experienced that, she couldn't go back to what he would have with a man like Davenport. She couldn't settle for anything less than love. *Love*? Did she love Ewan?

"I agree, lass," Ewan's brogue was soft as he spoke from just behind her.

She turned and gave him a glowing smile. Then turning back to her parents, she said. "Mama, Papa, may I introduce you to the Earl of Dumfries?"

Her mother gave him a warm smile as she curtsied in greeting. Her father's head cocked to one side as though sizing up the other man. "You were in London last season."

"Aye, I was." Ewan seemed to stand even straighter.

"Awarded a title for bravery and battlefield prowess." Her father's look only intensified.

Ewan gave a nod.

"I recall your company was quite sought after," her father said and Clarissa blushed at the implication. Ewan was titled, single, and *verra handsome*, as Fiona would have said. Of course he had been popular.

"I suppose," Ewan answered.

"But you've yet to marry?" her father asked.

It was Ewan's turn to give an appraising stare. "I've someone in mind but I need to speak with her father, first."

Ewan turned to her so that her parents could only see half his face and then winked. While she wanted to make the final decision, Ewan was wise to seek her father's approval. And something in her was shifting. She didn't feel as resistant to marriage.

Davenport was the problem, not the institution itself. It would be easier to open up to someone like Ewan. Someone who would return her affection and not give it to every passing maid.

"I wish you luck with that," her father murmured, turning away. She tried to read his expression but it was carefully concealed. When he turned back to her, he had a warm smile in place. "Let's finish this discussion after breakfast."

With a nod, Clarissa linked arms with her mother and they started down the stairs and to the breakfast room. Clarissa would make sure to eat a hearty breakfast, she'd need the fortification for the discussion that was about to ensue.

As they entered the room, her eyes met her uncle's. She deliberately walked around his side of the table and softly whispered, "No more running."

"That's a good lass," he softly responded.

Thankfully Davenport hadn't joined them and Clarissa tried to

decide which might be worse. Finishing the meal and having to speak with her father, or dragging her feet eating and risk having to see Davenport.

Ewan sat across the table from her, and she felt his boot brush her slipper. A smile touched her lips and she relaxed slightly. It would all work out.

His feet played with hers for most of the meal. As she neared the end of her eggs, his boot began to slide higher up her calf and onto her thigh. His eyes locked with hers across the table.

“Lord Dumfries,” Haggis called out. Ewan’s foot dropped. “We’re havin’ a meetin’ in a few weeks to discuss what best to do with the land. Lots of lairds are bringin’ in livestock rather than farmin’. Ye’re welcome to join us, if ye’d like.”

“It’s an interesting topic to be sure. But I’m not sure how much longer I can stay away from me own land. Can I think on it a day?”

“Of course,” Haggis answered.

“What brought you to Ravenscraig in the first place?” her father asked.

Clarissa tried not to wince. It wasn’t a favorable story that he’d been courting her cousin.

“He’s family, distantly speakin’,” Haggis answered.

Clarissa hurried through the rest of her meal. She needed to speak with her father about Ewan, but it was a conversation best had with a bit more privacy. “I’ll meet you in an hour, Father,” she murmured.

“No need, I have had enough. We’ll speak now.” Then he rose too, and with a nod, headed for the door.

Taking a breath, she glaced toward Ewan. She could do this.

But it grew infinitely more complicated as she stepped out of the breakfast room because Davenport had been about to enter and the latch was furiously whispering in her father’s ear.

Some small part of her wanted to turn and go back to the safety of the dining room or retreat to her room. But the strength in her was growing so instead, she stepped up to the two men. “A secret I should know about?”

Davenport eyed her with a coldness that shouldn’t have surprised her. Of course he had no feeling for her, but he had, after all, wanted to marry her and so she started at his frozen face. “No secret. I was telling him about your recent engagement.”

Crum. He father turned, looking livid, and motioned for her to follow.

She straightened her shoulders and walked by Davenport, head high despite the quaking of her legs.

Her father turned into the library and without a word, seated himself in the center of the room and then motioned for her to take

the chair next to him.

It was as though she were a child again, about to get scolded.

She tried not to sigh, it wouldn't help. While she dreaded this moment, she wouldn't marry Davenport.

"A marquess is much better than an earl." Her father's plain-spoken words took her by surprise.

She blinked a few times to recover. "Even if you hate the marquess and he'd make you absolutely miserable?"

"There is that. But if you don't marry him, who else might you marry in England? You're not actually thinking of leaving the country permanently?" Her father's pleading tone softened her response. This was a different conversation than she expected to have.

"I might. But if Queen Victoria can spend her holidays in Scotland, why can't you?" She gave him a small smile.

"And Lord Dumfries. Are you considering his suit?" Her father didn't look at her as he asked, which seemed odd.

"I am considering it," she shrugged. She wasn't lying.

"Then why is Lord Davenport under the impression you are already engaged?"

A blush stained her cheeks. "I am already ruined so what does it matter if I am ruined twice?" she asked.

His moment of confusion was quickly replaced with anger. He leaned forward, his voice rising. "You were lying to Davenport? Why would you tell him you were engaged when you weren't?"

"I don't care what he thinks just so long as he leaves." Her own voice was rising.

Her father blinked back his shock. "You never speak to me like this."

"I trusted you to do what was best for me," she spit out. And suddenly she understood that even more than Davenport, perhaps even more than herself, she was angry at her father. "I'm actually glad he was caught tuppung the maid. It saved me from a terrible life. But you've put your ambitions before my happiness in a way that would have destroyed any chance at happiness." Her breathing was coming in short gasps. "Ewan would like to marry me. But how I can trust him with my happiness when I can't even trust my own father?"

Then, without another word, she rose and left the room.

Chapter 16

Anger coursed through her as she stomped through the house.

Climbing the stairs, she started toward her room but realized she couldn't be confined to such a small space. She needed the outdoors. Passing her room, she continued down the hall to the back stairwell and out the kitchen door, taking the lane that led to the barn.

The clouds kept the sun at bay but no moisture fell from the sky. She had the sudden urge to ride. Not a big beast like Fiona had put her on, but a gentle mare. Feel the air and watch the scenery. She wasn't even dressed for it but none of it mattered now.

"Clarissa," Ewan called behind her. "Where are you going?"

She spun around, the sound of his voice somehow invoking the tears she hadn't even been aware she was holding back. "I needed a few minutes alone."

"I can leave if ye'd like, lass." His eyes were gentle and understanding and she appreciated that he asked. That he worried what she might want.

And she found she didn't want him to go at all. "Stay with me." Her voice was breathier than she'd intended, a need filling it that she didn't mean to express. But suddenly, she wanted to touch him again. Feel his hard strength. It would wash away her anger and her fears.

With a nod, he took her hand and started leading her toward the path to the beach. He was moving quickly and her skirts tangled. For a sickening second, she was falling but he planted both hands on her waist and lifted her to keep her upright and untangling her skirts in the same smooth motion.

She grabbed his wrists as he held her in the air and when he gently set her down, she kept holding on because his skin against her own both soothed and excited her senses.

His arms wrapped around her and he pulled her to his chest, nuzzling her neck. "I've missed ye, lass."

She grinned. "I missed you too, though it seems ridiculous to say as it's only been a few hours since we were in bed."

At the word "bed," he swung her into his arms and carried her

down to the beach. She rested her head on his chest as he easily moved, despite her additional weight. "You don't have to carry me," she murmured.

"You're light as a feather." He kissed her forehead then nudged 'til her lips were facing up to his to plant a gentle kiss. "It will give you a chance to tell me what has you so upset."

She sighed. "I knew I was angry at Davenport and embarrassed to face society. I even understood that I was upset with myself for allowing it all to happen, but I didn't understand how livid I am with my father. He's supposed to be the one who protects me." She stopped before she admitted that it made it difficult for her to trust anyone else.

He gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm not one to tell ye what to do but I can say, Fiona might be a wee bit angry with her da too. He tried to force a marriage on her she didna want."

She huffed a breath. "He wanted to see her safe and in a good match."

"Exactly," he answered.

She looked up at him as she pondered the statement. Uncle Haggis had not taken his error to the ridiculous lengths her father had, trying to repair an engagement that had made a fool of her in front of all of London, but they did share some commonalities. Their fathers had wanted to see them matched without taking their feelings into account.

They'd forgotten their daughters were grown women and not little girls capable of understanding themselves. "But why does my father persist?"

They'd now reached the rock cliff where'd they sheltered from the storm. He ducked under the lip giving them some privacy and shelter from the wind. Sitting down, he pulled her into his lap. "It's within your father's right to insist on the match. It's because he loves you that he's listening at all. Try to be patient and explain it to him again." Ewan kissed her lips as she realized the truth in his statement.

His mouth started trailing down her neck. She wound her fingers up into his overlong hair pulling on the strands. "You're right. I need to be patient and try to stop being so angry."

He smiled against the skin of her collarbone. "Take it from me, anger will cripple you. Keep you from making good decisions for yourself." His hands were undoing the buttons in the back of her dress and the fabric fell forward revealing more skin for him to kiss.

"What good decisions has anger kept you from?" she asked, her breathing growing more rapid as his lips kissed along the top of her breast.

"It almost kept me from pursuing you," he whispered as he pushed

the fabric of her chemise aside and lightly kissed the peak of her nipple.

Her head fell back as she arched toward him. "How do you know courting me is wise?" She could barely get the words past her lips, her head was swimming with desire. But she pushed through, needing to hear his answer. She was desperate to understand how to choose the right path. Because in this moment she wanted him to be the best choice.

"You ease the ache in my heart, lass. Ye're making me feel whole again."



He continued to kiss her chest, pulling the other side of chemise down. He told himself it didn't matter if she didn't respond but part of him was holding his breath. Because he couldn't lose her now. The pieces of his mangled heart were just fitting back into place.

"You ease the ache in my heart too," she whispered, her hands pulling his hair. "I couldn't have made it through this without you."

Relief and joy had him resting his forehead on her chest for a moment before his hand reached for the hem of her skirt. Then he was sliding it up under the layers of fabric, along with her pantaloons to the slit opening at the top. Pushing the fabric aside, his hand lightly brushed her folds and her body jerked in response, her hips bucking toward him. Her hands were pulling at his hair in an almost painful grip but he loved it all the more as he brushed against her again with a little more pressure.

The moan that escaped her lips made him pant with desire as he began to massage her sensitive bud.

Heat radiated off her as she writhed in his arms. His own desire straining to be released. She'd only left his bed a few hours before but that seemed to have stroked the flames between them rather than dousing them.

"Ewan." She gasped his name and he nearly came undone.

"Mo chridhe," he groaned. Her body was tensing and tightening underneath him and he had the sudden urge to taste her, know every part of her. Lowering her to the sand, he lowered his head until it was fitted between her legs.

It didn't take more than a flick of his tongue before she was coming undone, gasping for air, crying his name into the wind.

Holding onto her hips, he kissed his way back up her body, nuzzling her neck. Even with all her skirts between them, her legs wrapped around his waist.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, he brushed a tendril of hair back from her face. "You want choice, mo chridhe, and I want you to have that."

"Thank you so much for understanding." Her lips found his, her hips rubbing against him till he wanted to cry out in frustration and desire.

"Which is why I can't be inside you again. The more times we do that the more likely I am to plant a seed in your belly, lass," he whispered in her ear.

"A baby," she nearly cooed and he smiled to himself. He was winning this war slowly but surely. He'd make her his.

"Not now, though, lass. It's not the way we want it to happen." He was pulling her dress back up onto her shoulders but she lightly pushed him away, a smile playing on her lips.

"If it did already, what will we do?" She didn't look upset, only curious and so he answered honestly. "We'd have to marry, lass. I won't have my bairn be a bastard."

She gave another nod. "I agree." Her eyes traveled down his body and stopped as they landed at the juncture of her legs. "Does that mean we have to stop this?" She pointed between them.

He gave a rueful grin. "There are other things we can do, I suppose. Like what I just did for you." He wanted her to want to marry, but he didn't want to push her away.

Smiling still, she bit her lip, her hand resting on his bare knee. "Do you wear anything under that kilt?" Her hand began travelling up his thigh.

"You know I don't," his voice rasped out as her hand reached his inner thigh. And then she was touching him, softly exploring his manhood in a way that was innocent and wicked all in the same breath.

"It's so soft," she murmured making his breath hiss out. Dimly he was aware that snow had begun to fall despite it being early May. A lambing snow, was what it was called, but soon bright colors behind his eyelids made him forget all about it as his body heaved to completion.

Gathering her closer, he peppered her face with kisses as she trailed her hand along the contours of his chest. "So strong," she murmured, sounding terribly sleepy.

"Ye can't fall asleep, love. We'll be missed if we don't go back." He kissed her eyes, then her nose.

She gave him a sleepy smile. "Let's stay here forever. Just the

two of us.”

“I know the perfect place for just the two of us,” he whispered as her body relaxed further. He’d win her over. But he’d do it with kindness, love, and caring. And in the end, she’d be his because she wanted to be.

“I think I’d like that.” She nuzzled her face into his neck then.

“Are ye sayin’ what I think ye might be? You’ll return to Dumfries with me?” He used a finger to look in her eyes then.

“Yes,” she murmured, her body fitted to his.

“Will ye be my wife?” His lips pressed to her ear, softly imploring her to say yes.

“Yes,” she agreed.

He gathered her closer still and held her tight to his chest.

Chapter 17

The next day, Clarissa sat reading in the library. She hadn't slept much again last night, Ewan having snuck into her room before she'd even had the chance to make it to his.

She grinned at the memory. Oh the things they'd done. Beautiful, wicked things. He'd said he was a rake for her alone and, not only did she love that, but she found herself more wanton than she'd ever been. But only for him.

He was right, of course. He'd have to return to his home and she didn't want to be without him. The decision was fast approaching and she knew where her heart wanted to be. With Ewan. And so she'd tell her father that she'd decided to accept Ewan's offer.

The door opening startled her slightly and she looked up from her book she'd barely been reading. Lord Davenport stood before her, looking impeccably groomed as always. A ridiculous image of him attempting to tup the maid without mussing his hair made her near giggle. She held it back.

"I've come to say my goodbyes," he announced. "I'm leaving on the morrow."

She gave a nod, unsure of what to say. *Thank you for visiting or come again* seemed untrue and inappropriate so she settled for, "I wish you all the best."

"And you as well," he replied stepping closer and nerves fluttered in her belly. She had hoped that would be the end.

He took a breath. "Which is why I must implore you one last time to consider my suit."

"Lord Davenport," she started, wanting to end this conversation before it began. Even without Ewan, she wouldn't marry Davenport, but Ewan made her that much stronger.

"Call me James." He gave her a pointed look. "I know you fancy yourself in love."

"That has almost nothing to do with why I won't marry you." Why deny it?

"I never lied to you, Clarissa. I never pretended to have feelings I

didn't or misrepresent what I wanted from you." His eyes were piercing as he leaned forward.

She took a steadying breath. "That is all well and good but it doesn't change what happened."

"Arranged marriages have an understanding."

"Does that understanding include humiliation in front of all of English society?" Her voice was rising.

His face spasmed into something that appeared to be regret or pain. She didn't care. He deserved to hurt. It wasn't even close to how he'd hurt her. "You're stronger than I gave you credit for. Most ladies wouldn't have disobeyed their father as you did." To her shock he ran his fingers through his perfectly coiffed hair, mussing it considerably. "And you're right, of course. I can't take it back and, unless I find another bride with a suitable dowry, I'll likely be ruined for my misstep as well."

She caught her breath then. To sell off his belongings would most certainly be an equivalent humiliation. Her face softened and her anger eased. "You'll find someone. There are plenty of ladies more aware of the trade they would be making if they married you."

His eyes snapped up to hers. "You're still making that trade, Clarissa. That is what you need to understand."

She stared at him in complete confusion, wondering what on earth he was talking about. "I don't know what you mean."

"Dumfries is smarter than me. I'll give him that. He's appealed to your heart and, most likely, to your body. I thought I only needed to win over your father. I didn't understand your spirit."

"He....he...didn't even know I had a dowry," she stuttered out. But a sinking dread pulled at her stomach.

His face scrunched in disbelief. "Of course he knew, everyone knows. Is that what he told you?" he shook his head and his eyes rolled heavenward. "I wounded your pride, Clarissa. I admit it freely. But when you discover he was just after the coin, he'll break your heart."

She sat stunned into silence, willing herself not to cry. Not in front of him of all people. Part of her wanted to stand up and cry out her denial while another was forced to admit it was a possibility. Ewan needed money, he'd made no secret of it and all of England knew about her dowry. Ewan wouldn't trick her like that would he?

He took advantage of her silence to take her hand and place a soft kiss on it. "You can still change your mind. No matter what you've done with him, we have an understanding."

Before she could answer, tell him how ridiculous a marriage based on an understanding of infidelity sounded, he stood and was gone.

If Davenport hadn't been paying attention to her in London, he

certainly had been in Scotland, because he had undoubtedly found her weakest point. She was afraid that no man would love her more than he loved her dowry. That it was the most attractive thing about her and if she entered a relationship, she'd undoubtedly find that the man she'd fallen for did not return her feelings.

She'd known Ewan needed money to repair his lands after being gone. No wonder she'd been so resistant. In her heart, she'd always been worried that it wasn't her he wanted at all.

Chapter 18

She stayed in her room for dinner that night, not wanting to see anyone. Clarissa knew she was hiding again. But her conversation with Ewan needed to be private and she was a terrible liar. Her feelings would be written all over her face.

Finishing her tray of food, she set it in the hall and then paced around her room. The house grew quiet but sleep eluded her.

Around midnight a soft knock came at her door. "Clarissa," Ewan called.

She bit her lip. Taking a breath, she tiptoed to the door. "I don't...I don't feel well."

She heard his swear softly. "I shouldna have kept ye outside for so long, lass. Do ye have a fever?"

He was blaming himself? Guilt rolled in her stomach. "No, I'm fine, really." She clasped her hands together. "I just need some rest, that's all."

"Let me check on ye, lass, to be safe. I hate to think—"

"No," she said a too loudly and much too fast. She thought she wanted a private conversation with him but the truth was, she just wanted more time to sort out her feelings. "I...I'll see you at breakfast."

He was silent for so long that she crept closer to the door to see if she could hear any sound. Was it possible he'd left?

"Clarissa, open the door." The volume of his voice startled her, he was no longer whispering, and she jumped back giving a little cry.

"I can't...I mean I shouldn't...You wouldn't want to fall ill," she fumbled hurriedly.

"Open the door now, or I'll pound on it 'til I wake the entire house." His voice rumbled with anger and she paused for only a second before rushing to the door.

As soon as the latch slid over he pushed it open and then quickly closed it. Clarissa might have been afraid, allowing an angry man into her room, but Ewan would never hurt her.

His eyes scanned up and down her. "What the devil is going on?"

Her eyes drank him in too. His strength, the broad chest, strong arms, and chiseled jaw, his overlong hair.

Some part of her wanted to rush into his arms and forget her fears. Seek comfort in the warmth of his embrace.

"I...I... just didn't feel well and I..." She looked away, not making eye contact.

He moved closer then and she could smell him. His fresh, manly scent that filled her with longing. "You're not tellin' me the truth. Out with it."

She gave a nod, breathing in his scent, drawing strength from it, but still not looking at him. "I wanted to know if you knew about my dowry when you arrived to court Fiona."

She heard him suck in his breath, could actually feel him tensing. "I didna."

"Everyone knows about it," she answered but it sounded foolish repeating Davenport's words here in front of Ewan. She looked at him then, because the truth would be in his eyes.

"Well, I didna." His eyes were narrowing. "What does it have to do with anything?"

Didn't he already know? Was he lying? "You came here looking for an heiress. Fiona told me so."

His eyes widened and for a moment, pain spasmed across his features before he masked them again. "Ye think I only want yer dowry?" his voice held a soft, dead calm that frightened her more than his anger would have.

She stepped closer, her gaze imploring him to understand. "I can't be fooled again, Ewan. It would destroy any hope I have left."

"But after what we've shared, I can't believe you still don't trust me." He turned away and stepped to the window. Raking his hands through his hair, he crossed his arms over his chest.

Fear was bubbling inside her. She thought this was what she wanted but looking at him now, she wasn't at all sure about what she was doing. When he wasn't there it was easy to doubt but with his large frame filling her bedroom, her only thought was to throw herself in his arms and beg him to kiss her into oblivion. "I love you," her voice sounded strange to her own ears. "But I'm afraid."

He turned then. Every line of his body was hard as stone. "That just isn't good enough. I've been trying to be patient but ye doubt me at every turn. How can we build a life on that?" His voice was growing louder with every word.

She shook her head. "Please don't be angry. I don't want to doubt."

"I could marry ye anyway, lass, and hope that my love wins ye over." His tone sounded deflated and he scrubbed his face with his hands. "But what if I dunna?"

“Please...” she said because in this moment, she didn’t know what else to say. And then she threw herself into his arms.

In that moment she realized that he felt like home. His chest was under her ear as his strong arms wrapped protectively around her. One of his hands snaked up into her hair and tilting her head back, his lips crashed down on hers.

It was a desperate, passionate kiss that was made more achingly beautiful by the threat of loss. Her lips clung to his and his arms wrapped more tightly around her.

He pulled away first, lifting his head. She stood on tiptoe to keep from breaking the contact but all too soon, his lips left hers. “I have to go.”

Her heart thumped wildly. But tomorrow would be a new day and then she could think about how to make this better. Because now that she was losing him, she realized that they belonged together. “We can talk in the morning. I’ll find an excuse to slip away.”

“Lass, I didna mean I needed to leave your room. I meant I needed to leave Castle Ravenscraig.” His arms slipped from her waist back to his sides. “This has gone too far already and if I let it go any further...”

“No.” She stepped back. “Why would you need to leave?”

“If ye think I can fake that kind of feeling, I’m not sure ye know me at all.” It was his turn to look away. “I know ye’re trying to protect yer heart but ye’re breaking mine in the process.”

Covering her mouth with her hands, she looked at him, trying to keep the tears at bay. “Don’t say that. Of course I know you and I would never—” But she stopped. Because Davenport had told her, he’d never meant to hurt her. That didn’t mean he hadn’t.

He didn’t say another word but she heard him walk across the room. Heard the door click open, swing out, and then snap shut.

She didn’t move for several seconds, her eyes closed. She was afraid that if she took even a single step, she’d shatter, never to be put back together.

Chapter 19

Never in her life had she cried so much. She'd slept for a few hours between tears. She was dimly aware that the sun had risen and breakfast had come and gone. In a way Davenport had been right. This time her heart was involved and it hurt so much more than wounded pride.

What made it all the worse was it was her own fault.

A soft knock sounded at the door. She thought to ignore it but her mother's voice called from the other side, "May I come in?"

Dragging herself out of bed, she crossed the room and slid open the lock. Swinging the door open, her mother stared at her for a moment before sweeping into the room and folding her daughter into a hug.

If she'd had any tears left, she'd have cried again, but all she could do now was rest her head on her mother's shoulder. Clarissa's voice caught as she mumbled, "I've ruined everything."

"I doubt it. But tell me what's happened." Her mother smoothed her hair and led her to sit on the bed.

Without explaining how she'd allowed Ewan into her room unchaperoned, she told her mother how she'd questioned Ewan's motives and how he'd left.

Her mother gave her a sad smile. "That is difficult." Her mother sighed. "Do you truly think that's why he asked you to marry him?"

Clarissa shrugged. "I don't know what to think anymore. I just can't allow another man to humiliate me."

"And how do you feel about him?" her mother's voice was soft and her look questioning.

"I love him. I never want to be—" she stopped. She was going to say that she never wanted to be without him. She really had made a mash of this entire situation.

"Darling," her mother held her hands. "If he only wanted your dowry, how do you think he would have responded to your accusation?"

Clarissa paused. If what he wanted was her money, he would have assured he wasn't in search of a dowry and married her at the first

possible moment. Instead, he'd been so hurt, he'd left with no bride and no dowry at all. "Oh mother," she gasped.

"It's not too late, darling. He only left an hour ago." Her mother pulled her to her feet.

"Go after him?" she asked. Her mother nodded, squeezing her hands.

"But father?"

"You let me take care of him." Her mother was already pulling her up and crossing to the wardrobe.

"He'll be on horseback and I'll be in a carriage, how am I going to catch him?" But she started dressing.

"He'll have to stop at some point."

Nodding, she pulled the cord to summon a maid. "Kieran hates the rain. Maybe we'll get lucky and it will start."

"It's Scotland in spring. Of course it will. There's a tray outside your door, eat something," her mother called as she pulled out a sturdy gown for travel.

Within forty-five minutes, she'd jumped into the carriage, Agnes accompanying her as a companion. Uncle Haggis said they'd likely stop at the Cock n' Bull Tavern and Inn in Kirkcaldy for the night since they had gotten a late start. Apparently Kieran had been difficult to convince to leave.

If they weren't there, the ladies were to turn back to Ravenscraig. Her Uncle Haggis would arrange a proper escort to take them on the four-day journey to Ewan's home in Hawick.

Her father had been terribly upset by the arrangement but, true to her word, her mother had pulled him aside. Someday, Clarissa would have to ask her what she said.

It was near sunset by the time they approached Kirkcaldy but it was already dark, a storm was brewing. An eerie quiet fell, and Clarissa was near holding her breath. Nervous anticipation was building inside her while a sort of energy filled the air.

What if he wasn't there? What if he was and he rejected her apology? Her hands fisted in front of her mouth, dread pooling in her stomach.

Just as the carriage rolled into town, a rumble of thunder rattled the carriage. Clarissa gasped, because she knew what thunder would do to Ewan.

The driver needed no encouragement to whip the horses faster and soon the Cock n' Bull came into sight just as the sky opened up and poured. "Head inside," the driver yelled. "I'm just gunta get these horses in the barn."

With a nod, Agnes and Clarissa made a dash for the inn but the rain soaked them in the minute it took to reach the door.

Excellent, she groaned to herself. I'm to look like a drowned rat when I try to win back Ewan.



Ewan sat in the tavern nursing his third ale. He was near the fire,

but the warm crackling flames did little to improve his mood. And the ale was doing nothing to quiet the ache in his heart or the thoughts ravaging his head.

The room was crowded and people chatted happily all around him but he'd been silent for hours and though Kieran was next to him still, they'd barely spoken since leaving Ravenscraig.

Kieran had told him he was a dimwitted fool for leavin'. With some distance from the castle, he was beginning to think Kieran had been right and he was being foolish. He hadn't listened then, but maybe now he should.

"Earlier," he grunted to Kieran, "when ye said I was bein' a fool, what did ye mean?"

Kieran stretched in his chair, next to Ewan. "Ye're sure ye want to hear this?"

Ewan gave a nod.

"I know she hurt yer pride, questioning yer motives," Kieran started.

"I gave her my heart, and she wanted to know if I was only interested in her money." His voice was louder than it should have been. He took a breath.

"She's just been hurt, ye ken. Agnes told me what happened to her, and I can't believe she came as far with ye did as she did after that." Kieran stopped, looking over at him.

He was busy staring into his ale. Because he'd told her he'd be patient. And the first time she didn't step forward, but stepped back, he'd cut and run.

"It's like you with thunder, ye ken?"

"I dinna ken." He winced because despite his denial, he had a feeling he did ken.

Kieran cleared his throat. "Ye understand it's not a cannon. But when you hear the noise ye're mind takes ye back there. I think that it's what it must be like for Clarissa. She knows she can trust ye, but somethings, they just spook her, even when she understands they shouldna. She's been broken too and she's tryin' to fix it."

Ewan's head found his hand. Because he was a fool.

"What do I do, Kieran?" His eyes were squeezed shut.

"Go back, and tell her ye'll wait as long as takes for her to be ready." His friend's hand rested on his shoulder.

He gave a nod but then another sound caught his attention. Thunder rolled in the distance. He stood like a shot. "I'll just head to my room," he muttered.

"Are ye sure ye want to be alone?" Kieran stood too. "The sound might be more muted here with all the other people and the fire goin'."

"I don't want anyone to see me." He turned then and started for the stairs. As he made his way to the front of the inn to access the staircase, the front door flew open just as another crack of thunder made him freeze in fear.

Just as quickly it closed but his eyes were too glazed to see anything as he stood, motionless.

Suddenly cold hands were pressed to his cheeks. He blinked his eyes several times and looked down to see Clarissa staring up at him. "Ewan," her soft voice hesitated as a question filled her eyes.

"I need to get to my room," he grated out, his breathing shallow.

"Who are ye, then?" someone asked from his left.

"I'm his wife," Clarissa answered. "Could you tell me what room you've assigned us please?"

Ewan didn't hear the answer but he knew he was being led up the stairs. Leading him to the bed, she gently pushed him down to sit on the edge. She began singing and he shuddered as she moved away.

"Come back here, lass," he choked out.

Her song halted but her voice was gentle. "I'm near soaked through, I've got to take off my cloak at least."

That brought him back to attention. His eyes sharpened and focused on her. Wet hair hanging down her back, her cloak was drenched. Despite the thunder still rumbling outside, he stood and whisked the wet fabric off her shoulders. Her gown was also soggy in spots and his fingers steadied to undo the buttons.

She was soaked to the bone and still caring for him. He kissed her forehead as the last button gave and whisked her into his arms, throwing back the covers and laying her in the bed. Climbing in next to her, he pulled the blankets over them and snuggled her close to his body. "Are you too cold, lass?"

"I'm fine, really. I haven't been wet that long. How are you?" She tipped her head back and those eyes stared up at him with that look that had captured him from the first.

"I'm perfect now that ye're here." And then he took a breath. "I'm sorry I left, lass. I told ye I'd be patient and I—"

But she covered his mouth with her hand. "The fault is mine. You're right. We can't build a relationship if we don't trust."

Pulling her hand aside, he captured her lips with his. "We're getting married, lass." He murmured between kisses.

"Yes," she breathed back though it hadn't been a question. His hand travelled down her corset to her backside, which he pulled in tight to him.

"I'll wait longer if ye want, but if ye'll have me, we'll have the ceremony performed tomorrow. Right here in Kirkcaldy."

Bringing her hands to his cheeks, she pulled away to look into his eyes. His heart near beat out of his chest as he waited for her answer. "I'd like that." She gave him a glowing smile.

Ewan barely noticed the storm that raged outside. If she could overcome her fears then so could he.

Pulling his shirt over his head, he started on the strings of her corset. He couldn't be gentle or artful as he yanked at them. He just wanted to feel her skin.

Fortunately, she didn't seem to mind as her fingers reached under his kilt. "Mo chridhe," he gasped as her hand grazed the already swollen flesh of his manhood.

"Take it off," she panted as came up onto her knees on the bed to pull her chemise over her head.

In seconds they were both undressed and he dove back into the bed, wrapping her in his arms.

The feel of her skin made him groan and it was joined by her own sound of pleasure. "Oh, Ewan," her lips were on his face, his neck, and her hands were tangled in his hair. "I love you. I'll never doubt again."

Wanting to be closer to her, he settled between her legs and found her already wet and ready for him. Sliding inside of her, his hands combed through the wet strands of her hair. "I love you too, mo chridhe." He kissed her lips as she pulled him closer.

"Let's never disagree again," she gasped as he moved inside her.

He gave a laughing groan. "But making amends is so satisfying."

They stopped talking as the pace grew quicker and the passion built. They kissed over and over as their bodies moved together. She would be his, forever. It made him near lightheaded as they neared completion, their breathing and bodies moving as one.

The rhythm became more erratic as did their kisses until Ewan felt her squeezing him so tightly, he could barely hold on and when she cried out in release, he fell over the edge, groaning out his climax.

Never had it been like that. So complete. He lay to her side and pulled her into his arms. "I have to tell ye that I was going to return to the castle tomorrow."

Clarissa tipped her head back to look at him, her sleepy eyes

assessing him as she gave him a soft smile. "Oh, but I had to come here and surrender to you. I've lost my heart, you see, and so now I'm your prisoner."

"Surrendering to the laird are ye?" His body was suddenly not sated at all but began tightening again. "What shall I do with such a delectable prisoner?" He began trailing kisses down her body.

She giggled, but lay placid in his arms. "I am sure you'll think of something."

"I already have. I surrender to you too, mo chridhe." He reached her nipple and gave it a gentle suck. Her gasping breath told him she wouldn't be sleepy for much longer.

A knock at the door startled him. "Who is it?" Ewan called gruffly.

"We need to head back to the castle," Kieran called.

"It's late," Ewan answered exasperated.

Kieran pounded on the door again. "There are no rooms for Agnes. Unless ye want her in with you, we've got to go. I'll not have an innocent in my charge."

"Then give her your room and sleep in the common room."

"With the pickpockets?" Kieran sounded totally agitated, which was unlike him.

"There are no thieves in the inn." Ewan was trying not to be completely irritated. He had the woman he loved naked in his arms.

Kieran pounded louder. "I'll get the innkeeper. Tell him ye're not married." That got Ewan up. Tossing the covers over Clarissa, he rose from the bed and, pulling on his kilt, crossed to the door.

"What the feck is wrong wit ye?" Ewan gave him a glare. "This is not how brothers in arms treat one another."

Kieran had the decency to look ashamed. Then he hissed out a whisper. "It's Agnes. She is so blonde and pretty and she goes around looking down her nose at me fer not bein' as noble as ye." Kieran ran his hands through his light brown hair. "I want to throttle her when I don't want to kiss her."

Ewan bit back a smile but it was difficult. Because the signs were all there. Agnes was as innocent as they came so Kieran was right to worry. He'd end up married with one toe out of line. But then, Clarissa would have her cousin on the bordering property. "If we go back tonight, Clarissa's father could keep us from marryin'. I mean to have the deed done in the mornin'. I don't want to wait." Ewan reached out and clasped his friend's shoulder. "It's just one night."

Clarissa called from the bed, "Is Agnes all right?"

"She's fine," Ewan called back. "Kieran will make sure she is well cared for and safe. Won't you, Kieran?"

Kieran gave him a glare but, throwing his hands up into the air, turned and left.

Clicking the door closed he leaned his head against it. It wasn't fair what he was asking of Kieran but he needed Clarissa to be his. And he knew Kieran was a man of honor. He'd not do anything he shouldn't. Then again, Ewan considered himself a man of honor as well, and look how he was acting. Love made a man mad.

When he returned to the bed, Clarissa barely moved. Only the rise and fall of the blanket let him know she was alive and well. "He's gone." Ewan whispered.

When she didn't answer, he pulled back the blanket. There she was, flat on her back, sound asleep.

Slipping off his kilt, he snuggled up next to her. Never more comfortable, he fell fast asleep.

Chapter 20

Clarissa woke with the sun, aware of several things instantly. In addition to being snuggled against Ewan, warm and comfortable, she was famished. She hadn't eaten since breakfast yesterday.

For a moment she battled dueling urges, one to stay there forever, the other to fill her empty stomach. Before she could decide, the hand resting on her belly slid up her body, coming to her cheek. "It's our wedding day."

Her smile nearly cracked her face. "It's so exciting, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Where's the lass who was afraid to commit?"

"I trust you, Ewan." She turned to lightly kiss his lips. Just then her stomach gave a rumble to protest.

"What's that, then?" he asked, glancing down at her stomach.

Blushing she held her hand over it. "I was trying to catch you and I neglected to eat a few meals."

Kissing her lips again, he pulled back the covers and lifted her out of bed. "Let's get you dressed and down to breakfast."

When they arrived downstairs, Agnes and Kieran were already there, Agnes blushing and looking flustered and Kieran with a scowl. It deepened when he saw Ewan.

"I trust you slept well," Ewan asked Kieran.

"Barely a wink. I was busy keeping our young charge safe." Kieran near growled.

"I'm not that young. Almost eighteen!" Agnes replied hotly.

Clarissa blinked. What was going on?

Eating as quickly as her empty stomach would allow, they set off for the local church. Joy bubbled inside Clarissa. Now that she had given her heart over fully, she couldn't be happier.

The priest was sleepy but welcoming as he ushered Clarissa and Ewan to the front while Kieran and Agnes stood to the sides to bear witness.

He had them sign several papers and then gave them a nod. "Please join hands." The priest pulled out a ribbon and began to wrap it around their interlocked fingers.

They each repeated their vows, Ewan grinning as he said, "I promise to love, honor, and cherish ye for the rest of yer days."

Then the priest laid his hand on top of their bound ones. "These ribbons represent a binding before God that can never be broken. You belong to each other for the rest of your days."

Ewan leaned over and kissed her and she longed to melt into him. She closed her eyes and tried to savor every moment of their first kiss as man and wife.

And then the priest was unwrapping their hands and sending them on their way to begin their new life together.

A part of her desperately wanted to return to the inn and spend days alone with Ewan. But she had to return Agnes and she needed to speak with her parents. While her father had allowed her to leave, it was no guarantee that he would sign over her dowry to Ewan.

They did return to the inn but only to collect the carriage and horses. Clarissa and Agnes climbed into the buggy while Ewan and Kieran got onto their horses.

As soon as the wheels set in motion, Clarissa was on the other seat. "What happened last night?"

Agnes made a face at her. "Besides you leaving me with the most unethical laird in all of Scotland?"

"He didn't, I mean you didn't..." Clarissa grasped Agnes's hand.

Agnes's frown deepened. "Of course not. He's not interested in me like that. He just didn't want to give up his room. I told him if he was any type of gentleman, he would. What man doesn't help women stranded on the side of the road or—" Agnes tossed herself back on the seat. "Why wouldn't he be interested in me? I'm pretty enough. I don't have a title, but I've a decent dowry. Not like yours, of course, but still."

Clarissa bit back a smile. "But you wouldn't want a man who couldn't be a gentleman anyway."

"Of course, not," Agnes huffed. "He's just dreadful."

"I thought Ewan was dreadful too."

Agnes lifted an eyebrow. "It isn't even remotely the same. Ewan was always chivalrous and kind."

Clarissa shrugged. "I didn't think so, but I was too emotionally close to the situation to see it for what it really was." She didn't want to be too obvious. Agnes would have to discover the truth for herself.

They approached Ravenscraig just after the noon meal and Clarissa tried to calm the queasy churning of her stomach. Just before the drive, the carriage came to a halt and Ewan snapped open the door. "Are ye all right, lass?" he asked, holding his hand out to hers.

She took it and nodded as he gently pulled her out of the carriage. "Just a little nervous."

“Don’t be.” He held her hands as he kissed her forehead. “I’ll be by your side the entire time.”

“I know my mother approves but my father...” her voice trailed off. “What if he withholds my dowry?”

“We have each other, we’ll get by.” He gave her a reassuring smile.

She tried to return it. “What if he never speaks to me again?” Her hand shook a little in his. “I’m angry with him but I still love him.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, lass.” He squeezed her hands. “I’ll do everything I can to make it right with him.”

“You won’t give me up, will you?” she asked, a little fear trickling into her voice. Now that she’d almost lost him once, she knew she couldn’t again.

But he pulled her into his embrace. “Anything but that.” His lips whispered down her cheek. “Ride with me up to the castle. There will be no separating us then.”

With a nod, he swung up on the horse and then reached down, easily lifting her up. Settling her sideways in front of him, he settled her close to his body. She leaned her forehead on his chest, arms around his waist.

The steady beat of his heart calmed her own into a more normal rhythm. For a moment she relaxed and her eyes drifted closed.

But the sound of her father’s voice made her head snap back up. Roughly he called, “What is the meaning of this?”

She lifted her head, her eyes narrowing on her father. The rest of her family stood slightly behind him but she only looked at him. Now that she was in the moment, or perhaps because she was in Ewan’s arms, she wasn’t nervous anymore and she wouldn’t run. “Hello, Papa.”

The calm of her voice seemed to take him aback. “You were supposed to return last night.”

“There was a terrible storm. We had to stay.”

“And Agnes?” An accusation was apparent in those two words. While Clarissa no longer had a pristine reputation to protect, her cousin did.

“My lord,” Ewan swung down from the horse, holding her in his arms. Gently setting her to the ground, his hand still wrapped possessively around her waist. “The inn was full so I gave my room to the ladies and Laird McKenna and I shared.”

Her father leveled Ewan with a stare. “If I’ve word to the contrary, you’ll be marrying my daughter.”

Ewan cleared his throat. “I already have, my lord.”

Her father paled considerably. “Without my consent?”

But her mother stepped next to him and Haggis on the other side.

“Let’s take this conversation into the house, shall we?” Haggis

rumbled.

Her father turned his head, his lip curling. "She's my daughter, Haggis. You've no right to supersede me as you've done."

"We're family so I willna knock out yer teeth." Haggis crossed his arms. "Yer daughter just announced she's married an earl. She did a fair sight better than ye, I'd say. If yer angry, then it should be at yerself for making such a mess in the first place."

Those words were like a balm to her anger. She had done the right thing.

Her father just gaped at him but Ewan, with a squeeze to her hand, left her side and walked up to her father.

"My lord," he started.

But her father let out a huff of breath. "You outrank me, you don't have to call me 'my lord.' But you would if you hadn't just been awarded the title a mere year ago."

"Papa," Clarissa's exasperated huff cut through his response.

Ewan took that as an opportunity to continue. "I love your daughter, sir. I'll do my best to care for her and keep her in the comfort she's become accustomed to."

"Of course you will." Her father raised his hands in the air. "She's got a dowry large enough to keep the Queen content."

Ewan's face tightened. There it was again and Clarissa knew it was a point of contention for him. For the first time since they'd arrived, she was nervous.

"I won't take it." Ewan's voice was so low it might not have been heard over the ocean crashing in the distance but everyone seemed to hear him anyway because every eye turned to him.

Her father's mouth dropped open. "What are you saying?"

"I didn't marry her for the money and I don't need it. I'll provide for my family just fine without it. We'll have time before the bairns come to make the house right and build up the income."

"The bairns?" Her father's voice had lost all of its anger.

"Children, dear," her mother spoke for the first time, her hand coming to his arm.

"I married a Scot woman, I know what bairns are. I just, I hadn't really considered that new babies would be coming in the future."

"What was I marrying Davenport for?" Clarissa asked before she could stop the question from popping out.

"He didn't seem quite ready to settle. I thought it might be some time before children..." his voice drifted off. "He really was a dreadful choice, wasn't he?" Her father shook his head.

She'd needed those words, more than she had known. And when she heard them, she threw herself into her father's arms. He hugged her tight. "Absolutely awful," she laughed. "But it brought me

here, to Ewan.”

“You love him?” her father asked.

She nodded and he gave her one more squeeze. “I do, Papa.”

She stepped back and took Ewan’s hand again. “Mo chridhe,” he murmured as his large hand enveloped hers.

Epilogue

“W hen are Agnes and your aunt arriving?” Ewan was

sitting behind her, his arms creating a cocoon of warmth as she read the letter.

“Next week. They’ll stay until the baby comes.” She bit her lip. He wasn’t going to like the next part. “My parents are coming too.”

She felt him groan. It had been a year since they had married and she was now six months pregnant. He hardly allowed her to do a thing, so she was actually eager for the company, but she didn’t want to tell him that.

In the end, her father had finally convinced Ewan to take some small portion of the dowry to make his lands fully operational. But she knew her father. He was already looking for ways to bestow the rest of it on them. The Scots weren’t the only ones who were stubborn. Her father was too. Much like herself.

And the baby, there was no way he wouldn’t be there when the baby came. She’d have to talk to Ewan about granting her parents a parcel of land to build a house on if her father hadn’t already bought one. He’d be coming to Scotland as often as the Queen to visit his grandchildren.

“How long do ye think they’ll stay?” he asked, keeping his voice neutral. She wasn’t fooled.

“Long enough that you might ask Kieran if we can purchase that strip of land between your holdings and his,” she answered honestly without giving too much information.

This time he gave a loud groan. While he’d come to terms with her father, they weren’t a love match by any stretch. “Just so that they don’t always have to stay in our house,” she finished with grin.

He began trailing his hand up her arm as his lips kissed a path down her neck. “I’m going to need plenty of consoling while they’re here.”

She giggled. “Is that right?” Then she turned to give him a soft kiss. “For you, my love, anything.”

“I’d do anything for you too. Even give your parents land right

next to us.” He winked. “Do I have to build them a house?”

“You know my father, he’ll want to do it himself and it will give him something to do that keeps him out of your hair.”

He gave her a broad smile. “I’m beginning to like this idea more and more.” His hand slid back down to her arm and onto her growing stomach, gently massaging the skin. It was a tender touch filled with all the love he held for their child. She relaxed back into him.

“Will Fiona be joining yer uncle and aunt when they come?”

She gave a tinkling laugh then. “I don’t know yet. She’s still in the throes of wedded bliss.”

“We’re still in the throes of wedded bliss too.” His resumed his path down her neck, sliding onto her collarbone.

“Our bliss has culminated in a bairn,” she imitated his accent on the last word.

“Once the little lad or lass is out, can we continue with the bliss?” His voice was a low grumble, filled with heat and passion.

“Oh, we’re still in it now, aren’t we?” she gasped as his hand came up to brush her sensitive nipple.

“Most certainly. Now and forever,” he whispered and then they said no more. Their bodies speaking the language of love.

About the Author

More about Tammy

Tammy Andresen lives with her husband and three children just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. She grew up on the Seacoast of Maine, where she spent countless days dreaming up stories in blueberry fields and among the scrub pines that line the coast. Her mother loved to spin a yarn and Tammy filled many hours listening to her mother retell the classics. It was inevitable that at the age of 18, she headed off to Simmons College, where she studied English literature and education. She never left Massachusetts but some of her heart still resides in Maine and her family visits often.

What the Critics are saying:

“The characters are well-developed and interesting, the plot is edge-of-your-seat intriguing, and the setting is one with so much history. If you are a fan of history mixed with mystery and intrigue, you won't be disappointed.” Linda Thompson THE AUTHOR SHOW

“While the relationship between Lily and Eric is the primary focus of this story, the mystery/supense factor is what kept this from being JUST a historical romance. Lily in Bloom was a fast-paced, romantic read that I absolutely LOVED.” <http://alysenovak.blogspot.com>

“... it held not only a pure romance but the simple magic that goes with it. I was enchanted with this story from the beginning until the end and I didn't want it to end. I wanted it to go on.” Robin

Find out more about Tammy:

<http://tammyandresen.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/authortammyandresen>

<https://twitter.com/TammyAndresen>

https://www.pinterest.com/tammy_andresen/

<https://plus.google.com/+TammyAndresen/>

Check out Tammy's bestselling series: Taming the Heart

Taming a Duke's Reckless Heart

Taming a Duke's Wild Rose

Taming a Laird's Wild Lady

Taming a Rake into a Lord

Taming a Savage Gentleman

Taming a Rogue Earl

Scheming with My Duke

Linked Across Time Book Nine

Dawn Brower

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Scheming with My Duke Copyright © 2017 Dawn Brower

Cover art and edits by Victoria Miller

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

You never know where life might take you or which path is the correct one. Don't let that stop you from taking a leap of faith. Sometimes those are the best kinds of chances. Live, love, and do your best to find your own happiness. In the end that is all you can do. Thanks for taking a chance on me.

Chapter 1

Serenity Drake sat in the garden at Branterberry Castle. If she wasn't completely bored out of her mind, she might have appreciated the scenery a bit more. The garden had been sculpted in to several different paths. Depending on which one she took, she'd find a vast array of vegetation and floral plants to delight the eye. Certain flowers had more enticing aromas and drew her near. When she'd first seen the garden she'd immediately craved to explore its depths. A week into summer and she was ready to poke her eyes out.

Her duties—taking care of Sebastian Bennett, the little Marquess of Chisenhall—didn't entail much. She would give him lessons in the morning and then have the afternoons free. The duke didn't want her to corrupt his son and had only allowed her to be his governess out of respect for Serenity's sister, Genevieve. Her sister had to return home to save their other sister, Peyton. It had been hard to stay behind, but it was the right choice to make.

Peyton's visions were never wrong. Genevieve was meant to be in the twenty-first century, and Serenity's place was with the duke and his son. She just wasn't sure what that place was. If the duke wasn't going to allow her to help, she might as well return home. Except she didn't really want to go... Serenity missed Peyton desperately, and a part of her always would, but Genevieve would make sure she was all right and healed properly from her illness. As for Serenity, the duke and Sebastian needed her. He was being pigheaded and it would take some careful planning to make him realize the truth. Luckily, Serenity's stubbornness would make her keep fighting. In the end, she'd win and the duke wouldn't see it coming.

She picked a vibrant red flower and twirled the stem in her hand. Several loops in, she decided to lift it to her nose and take in its wonderful aroma. She had no idea what kind of flower it was, but she liked it. The color called to her, and in certain light, it almost matched her mahogany-red hair. Although, that was probably an exaggeration on her part—her long locks were actually closer to brown than red, but she liked the highlights brought out by the sun.

Whimsically, she plucked one of the petals off and tossed it over her shoulder, then repeated it a second time. "He loves me," she said aloud. Then plucked another and repeated, "He loves me." Serenity continued plucking the petals again and again until she had three left on the flower. Each time, saying over and over, "He loves me."

"What did that poor flower do to you?" Brandon Bennett, the Duke of Branterberry asked. His voice was filled with a mixture of amusement and befuddlement.

Serenity scrambled to face him, tucking the flower behind her back. How much had he overheard? Her cheeks heated under the hot sun and there was nothing she could do to hide it from him. Perhaps he'd believe it was a little bit of sunburn making them pink.

"Are you spying on me?" she asked him defiantly. Better to deflect than to admit that she'd been playing a silly girlish game. What had possessed her to pick the petals off the flower to begin with?

"It is my home," he said, lifting a brow. "I don't have to explain myself." He reached around and plucked the flower from her hand and held it before her. "You, however, are defacing some of the flora in *my* garden."

Drat. Was he going to bellow at her for something so stupid as picking a flower? Well, she wasn't going to allow him to dictate to her. Perhaps he should be on the defensive for once. He didn't like it much when she read him. She tilted her head and studied his aura. As usual, secrets and lies swirled around him. This spymaster kept it all close and didn't let anyone in. How many people did he protect with his clandestine information?

"You were watching me," she said moving closer to him. "Did you see something you liked?"

The duke backed away from her. His nostrils flared as he studied her. "I have better things to do than such inane a thing as spying on you."

Oh, he was backpedaling now. He protested a little too much. The duke had Peeping-Tom-like qualities—without the weirdness. She could use that to her advantage. He didn't appreciate her calling him out on them. Bully for him. Boredom made her do impetuous things, and he was about to become her new toy.

She stepped forward and brought her hand up to his chest, skimming it downward until it rested on his stomach. "So, Your Grace," she said seductively. "How often do you find the need to spy on me?" She trailed her fingers down and skimmed the top of his trousers. "Have you seen me in..." She leaned in closer and said in a hushed tone, "Nothing at all?"

He sucked in a breath and stared down at her. His cheeks flushed to a bright red and his breathing became uneven. "I would never," he

said. The duke cleared his throat. "How dare you impugn my name in such a manner. I'm a gentleman."

Serenity laughed and took a step back. Oh, how she loved to mess with him. "My darling, duke," she said. "You're a spy first and foremost and, as much as you like to protest the idea, you are very much a hot-blooded male." She winked. "Who happens to like what he sees before him. Deny it all you want, but if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times." She smiled and boldly met his gaze. "I see you. *All of you*. There's nothing you can hide from me. You best become accustomed to that fact as long as I'm here." Serenity couldn't fathom why he hadn't already...

At least he'd already forgotten about that blasted flower and her little game. That had been a close call. The duke glared at her as if she would burst into flames from ire alone. Poor man. He had no clue how to deal with her. One day he'd stop fighting what she already knew. They had an abundance of desire brewing between them. As soon as they gave into it, they'd find out how combustible they were together.

"You talk too much," he gritted out. "For all your claims of seeing me, I feel it's important I let you in on a little secret."

"Oh?" she tilted her head. "What's that?"

He was trying to flip things over to his advantage. She couldn't let him do that, but her curiosity had overcome her. What secrets could he have to impart? She waited on bated breath.

"I may not have your gifts," he said tightly. "But I have a few of my own that are comparable when it comes to hidden information."

She bet he did. He wasn't the premier spymaster in England for no reason. Serenity would uncover all of the things he wanted to hide, and then what would he do? There would be no barriers between them, and they'd have to figure out what they wanted from each other. She couldn't wait for that day to come. Amusement flooded her from the inside out. She couldn't contain it all from spilling forth and burst into laughter. "I'm so sorry," she said, wiping a tear away. "Were you supposed to be all foreboding or something?"

He growled. An actual real growl that rumbled forth and vibrated out of his mouth. Serenity's insides curled up and came to attention. *Oh, yes, do that again*. She didn't dare say that little tidbit aloud though. Maybe, if she stayed in the past, she would do so, but in this moment, they were still in the foreplay stage. It was a dance of sorts. She'd push him to the brink of frustration and then he'd storm away only to return again for more. He'd yet to push back at her in a way that would make her storm away. For months, they'd played this game with little to no results. Serenity wanted it to advance to the next stage, but how to push him toward her goal eluded her. What would it take to make him kiss her the way she kept imagining? She was

waiting for him to give as much as she threw in his direction. When that happened, they could move on to the next step. Serenity wanted him. All that he had to offer, but not until he was ready. The duke was fighting her every step of the way. Fortunately for him, she had patience for the both of them.

"You're an unnatural female," he complained. "What did I ever do to have you thrust upon me?"

He said that often enough it rolled off her as nothing. The duke really had to come up with better responses. It had become too easy for her to deflect it and counter with something nonchalant. She shrugged. "I suppose you're just lucky that way."

"You and I have entirely different views on what constituted good fortune," he said in an affronted tone.

Maybe if she'd been born in the nineteenth century she'd share his views. Being from the twenty-first century, she'd been raised to be a strong, independent female. Nothing would ever make her bow down and be a damsel in distress. She could not only take care of herself, but did so on a regular basis. Her decision to stay back while Genevieve returned to donate her bone marrow to save Peyton had been hers, and hers alone. It had given Genevieve the push to return when she'd been digging her heels in. No doubt her newly discovered sister had also finally admitted she still loved Trenton too. Everything, and everyone, were where they belonged. Serenity might toy with the idea of going back to her own time, but in truth she never would. Nothing would entice her to give up on the duke.

Serenity grinned. "Don't worry," she said. "In time, you'll appreciate me."

"If I don't die first," he muttered under his breath.

He was adorable. His dark hair was ruffled from the wind. She couldn't help wishing she'd been the one to tousle it into such disarray. Her duke, and she fully believed he belonged with her, was incredibly gorgeous. Olive green eyes framed by ink-black lashes, full lips meant to bestow kisses, and midnight hair that appeared silky. If she found out how soft it really was, she'd never be able to stop touching him. Who was she kidding? Once she put her hands on him in anyway there was no stopping her.

"I'd never allow it," she replied. "You and I have much to accomplish before you leave this world." Inwardly, she shuddered at the idea of him dying. She'd prevent it from ever happening if she could.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

Tongue in cheek she giggled. "No, you're not. But don't worry I'm not going to push. We have time before we go down that particular road."

He twirled the flower he'd confiscated from her between his fingers. "Does it have something to do with what you were doing to this poor bloom?"

Hell. She'd hoped he'd forgotten about that darn thing. It appeared as if her luck wasn't holding out as she'd hoped. The man saw entirely too much. Had he overheard her mutterings though? If he had, how was she to explain it?

"Of course not," she said dismissively. "I was lonely and a tiny bit bored. The flower amused me for a time."

He stared down at it. Three lonely petals remained attached. "Did you figure it out?" he asked cryptically.

"What?"

Please don't ask about the love me part... She didn't want to admit that the petal picking had everything to do with him and what she hoped they might find together. Her feelings were so entangled inside of her, she didn't know if she was going up or falling down.

"If he loves you?" He lifted a brow. "Who is it you're hoping is under your spell?"

He almost sounded—jealous? Dare she hope he was? Instead of addressing it and asking outright, she decided to play coy. Serenity rolled her eyes. "I am not one of your underlings you can trick into answering you."

She wouldn't mind being under him in a different way though... *Bad Serenity*. It was not the time for such thoughts. He wasn't ready to fall into bed with her and discover a passion that burned brighter than the sun.

"My dear, you are not an *ingénue* either," he said, glancing down and stopping momentarily at her bosom, then slowly raising his gaze up to meet hers. "However, I do give you credit for trying. I've dealt with a lot of females, and you're rather difficult to unravel. I'm not entirely sure I want to." He held the flower out to her. "I am rather curious what kind of man draws you in though. He must be rather brave or maybe even stupid to fall into your trap."

She should be insulted. But she wasn't fooled at all. Her lips tilted upward. "Admit it," she said sweetly. "You're jealous."

He practically glowed with it. The duke wanted to know who she was plucking the flower for. How would he feel if he realized it had all been for him?

"Not at all," he deflected. "I'm rather curious though. Why not add a few 'He loves me nots' into your game? I never once heard you mutter that particular phrase as you desecrated the bloom."

Heat filled her cheeks once again. He *had* overheard her. Well, she could avert an answer as well as he could. At least she could do it more convincingly than he did. "I have never been one to leave things

to chance,” she said flippantly. “Why go through the motions only to lose in the end. Throwing away the nots means I win no matter what.” Serenity licked her lips. “And I do so love winning.”

“That’s an interesting take on a girlish game,” he said hoarsely.

Serenity slid her tongue across her lips once again. His gaze followed the path her tongue took and he almost appeared—hungry. Oh, he liked that... “There’s nothing girlish about me, Your Grace.”

He swallowed. “On that score, you and I agree.” The duke thrust the flower in her direction. “By all means, finish the flower off and put it out of its misery.” Once he was gone she’d do exactly as he suggested, but perhaps this time she’d change the phrase a bit. Serenity took the flower from him and held it firmly in her grasp.

With those last words, he spun on his heels and left her alone in the garden. That had been an interesting bit of conversation. When they next spoke, she’d have to poke him a little more to see what she garnered.

She plucked a petal and tossed it over her shoulder. “Is he mine?” Another petal plucked. “We will be together soon.” The last petal flew over her shoulder. “A promise made is a promise kept.”

Serenity never went back on a promise once made. She made one to herself and silently to Brandon. Her duke would find out that loving her was the best thing that happened to him. She played the long game, and she intended to win.

Chapter 2

Brandon stormed into his study and headed toward the brandy.

He grabbed a glass, filled it to the top, and then drained the contents. The liquid burned as it traveled down his throat. His eyes stung and watered. He'd never swallowed so much in one gulp and had nearly choked from the effort.

Serenity Drake was driving him mad.

She'd been living with him under the guise of being his son's governess. Not that she didn't spend time with Sebastian... If Serenity did one thing, it was keep her word. Each morning, she would work with his son on subject matters that would enrich his world. She told him stories and tracked down appropriate books for a boy his age to teach him how to read. Thus far, she'd actually been the best governess he'd ever had.

He'd never admit it to her, but she worked better with Sebastian than Eve did. His son had taken to Serenity in ways he'd never have thought possible and he'd become riveted with all things Serenity Drake, and if Brandon were to be honest with himself, so was he. Her vivaciousness bled from her and soaked through those around her until they had no choice but to respond. His son had needed someone like her. Genevieve had been good with him, but she'd always carried a bit of sadness inside of her. Serenity didn't have that affliction and it showed. Working with Sebastian, she gave him the opportunity to learn and to play. Brandon couldn't find fault with anything she did with his son—even when he had desperately wanted to.

Brandon couldn't say the same where he was concerned. She made it a point to push the limits of their relationship whenever she could. He'd tried to avoid her as much as possible, but Serenity wouldn't allow that. She flitted through his life and made him question every aspect of his life. A temptress he no longer wanted to resist and burned to claim. Giving in went against everything that was ingrained inside of him. He would not topple over easily or willingly. When he gave in to his desire for her it would decimate his iron will. Brandon had worked hard to build that strength. His reluctance to release it

stemmed from his desire to keep that part of him whole. Being with Serenity... He wasn't sure he could be the spymaster England needed if he claimed her in the way he wished to.

He'd offered to marry Genevieve because he hadn't had any feelings for her. It would have been easier for him to leave her and be the spymaster England needed. She would have made a good mother for Sebastian, and he had trusted her. Serenity made him feel things he didn't want to, and it was becoming harder and harder for him to ignore them.

"I thought I'd find you in here."

Brandon closed his eyes as Serenity's voice washed over him. Bloody hell... Would he ever escape her? She was everywhere.

Who was he kidding? Even on the days she didn't appear before him she wasn't far away from him. She invaded his thoughts on a daily basis. Truth be told, he didn't really want her gone. If she ever left, he'd hunt the world for her even if that took him to a time that scared him to death. The stories he heard about the twenty-first century were mind boggling. He couldn't imagine the idea of automobiles, planes, or electricity. Although he rather liked the idea of lights instead of candles...

He stared down at the empty glass in his hand and contemplated refilling it. If he had to deal with Serenity, he'd require the fortification. Without giving it a second thought, he grabbed the decanter of brandy and filled his glass again. He turned toward Serenity and sipped the amber liquid.

"Your investigative skills are simply amazing," he drawled. "Perhaps I should hire you as one of England's spymasters."

"You couldn't afford me," she deadpanned. "Though I admit you'd be a fool to let me go. I may not be able to blend into any surrounding, but I could uncover information better than anyone you could recruit." She waved a hand dismissively. "Too bad I already have a job, and you won't be the beneficiary of my special skills."

Brandon swallowed another large gulp of brandy. Her statement held an ounce of truth; after all, her gift made her a walking, talking lie detector. She'd be a gem to have in an interrogation room. He wasn't about to admit that to her though. Serenity had enough self confidence to level a room if she chose to. She didn't need him to reinforce her belief in herself.

"Perhaps I have something of more value to entice you with," he replied.

Serenity licked her lips. With one swipe of her tongue he instantly hardened. She seemed to play games with him as often one would draw a breath. He was convinced she was aware of exactly how she affected him. He hadn't quite figured out what her end goal was

though. She might be able to read him, but he couldn't claim the same concerning her.

"I might be willing to listen to your offer." Serenity stepped closer and lifted the glass from his hand, taking a sip. "Nice," she said giving it back to him. "Perhaps I'll pour myself a glass since you didn't offer."

She sashayed past him allowing her skirts to brush his leg. He clenched the glass tightly in his hand and prayed for patience. As much as he wanted to, he was not going to lift her and have his way with her on his desk. Although, the more he let himself imagine it, the better it sounded. Why wasn't it a good idea? For the life of him, he couldn't think of a single reason why he should abstain.

Serenity brushed past him with her own glass of brandy in hand. Any other lady of his acquaintance would be scandalized at her freely drinking strong spirits. Brandy was a man's drink. A lady could have sherry or wine, but anything else was out of the question.

"Now, where were we?" she said. "Oh, yes." Serenity snapped her fingers. "An offer I can't refuse."

Hell. What had he managed to entangle himself in this time? He'd have to find something to give her or she'd bury him with his good intentions. When he'd made that statement, he'd been well in the throes of growing lust. He almost snorted at that imagery. His desire for her was always there. The only thing growing was his cock. One glance from her and he was ready and willing.

"There is no offer," he replied. "I'm going away for a few days. Something has been brought to my attention, and I have to investigate."

"Oh?" She raised a brow. "Has Napoleon escaped St. Helena?"

Brandon froze and asked as evenly as possible. "What do you know?" Could that evil bastard have actually escaped? Why hadn't she said so? He could have prevented it... With her knowledge, she could stop a great many things. He couldn't fathom why she didn't.

"About Napoleon? A lot actually—even the date of his death. Maybe one day I'll tell you." Serenity laughed. "It doesn't take much to get a rise out of you. One mention of the former emperor, and I have your full attention. I should do so more often and maybe I'd keep you focused on me."

He wanted to shake her. Napoleon wasn't anything to joke about. Didn't she realize the havoc that man had brought? He alone was capable of erupting chaos on the world. His maniacal plans could destroy lives. "You don't need to mention Napoleon to accomplish that goal." He gritted his teeth. She'd been toying with him as usual. Nothing was happening with Napoleon—though he would perhaps find a way to make her spill the date of his death. That information might ease his concern a bit.

“Ah,” she said. “He finally admits it.”

Damn. What had she pushed him to? “It’s hardly news,” Brandon said dryly. “You act as if the world revolves around you. Far be it from me to deny you that reality.”

A soft chuckle filled the room. “I’ll let that pass.” A grin filled her face. “You’re deflecting. It’s what you do best after all. I won’t remind you that you can’t hide from me.”

“I believe you just did.”

How could he forget for even a moment that she could see past every layer he’d carefully crafted? He wanted to, but she constantly ripped away the veneer he’d tried to hold on to. It was aggravating in ways he couldn’t fully describe.

“You’re right,” she said. “I apologize for my lack of discretion. I’m afraid I was never very good at pretending.” She drained the contents of her glass and set it on his desk.

Why did she have to be so lovely? If she was hideous perhaps he could dismiss her easily. No, even if she was scarred and plump, something about her would draw him in. She was irresistible. Brandon scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed. “I don’t have time for this.” He drained the contents of his glass and set it on his desk. “I’m going to tell my valet to pack my trunk. I have to travel to Manchester to investigate the ruckus growing in the area.”

Serenity reached out, placing her hand on his chest. “What’s in Manchester?”

Something in her face stopped him short. All color had drained from her face, and it was almost devoid of emotion. “What is it?” he asked.

She didn’t have precognitive skills. That was her sister’s gift. Something he’d said sparked an idea or a memory in her. He had to find out what she knew. It might be useful to his investigation. She didn’t enlighten him though and only stared up at him expectantly. Apparently, she was capable of staying quiet if she had a reason to.

“There is a movement for voting rights being extended to the working men,” he said reluctantly. “A couple men have stirred them up, and there are rumors they’re going to gather together in one place.”

“Henry Hunt and William Cobbett,” she said.

“Yes,” he said surprised. He shouldn’t have been though. “What do you know about them?”

She shook her head. “You can’t go.”

Like hell he couldn’t. It was his job to investigate any matters that might affect the government. This thing had the possibility of evolving into a large-scale problem. The two men had the working class riled. Even some women were joining the cause and demanding the right to

vote. As if that would happen...

"Maybe if you explained why I might be willing to heed your advice," he said encouragingly. He had no intention of staying behind. "Are you going to share your information with me?"

"I can't," she said. "What happens has to happen. It's part of history."

That didn't sound good... "What's the point of time traveling if you can't change things every now and then?"

Serenity laughed, but it wasn't a good one. It sounded hollow. "You must realize how ridiculous that sounds. I'm not here because I have some lofty goals of changing history. I don't have a horse in this particular race."

He frowned. What were her goals then? Other than being Sebastian's governess, he'd not bothered to ask her what she wanted. He'd been too afraid to ask, and he wasn't sure he was brave enough to do so yet. "Well," he replied. "Then I see no reason to remain at Branterberry." With those words, he spun on his heels and headed toward the exit.

"Wait," she called out.

Brandon stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "Are you prepared to give me what I want?" Perhaps not the best choice of words, but he rather liked how they had come out. She could take them however way she wished. In the end, he would be the one making the calls. Serenity needed a firm hand, and if she planned on remaining in his time, she would have to start making some concessions. Ladies did not rule anything. Maybe if he told himself that often enough he'd believe it too.

She licked her lips and smiled wantonly. "Indeed."

That one word sparked a fire in his belly and traveled south. His cock hardened even further to the point of pain. The trip to Manchester might be exactly what he needed. If he was smart, he'd leave her in the study and not look back. If he stayed, he might not leave the room for several hours. The dutiful side of him urged him to move forward, but the roguish side of him demanded he take what she clearly offered. He turned around and stepped toward her. It was automatic and he hadn't fully realized what he'd done until he stood before her.

"I'm glad you're staying," she said.

"I never agreed to anything of the kind," he replied. "I'm waiting for you to deliver on your promise."

Serenity closed the distance between them. She brought her hands upward and she caressed his chest. He sucked in a breath and steeled himself for the onslaught of torture. This was a familiar dance. She pushed, he returned the favor, and then he left unsatisfied. He wanted

to kiss her but never allowed himself the pleasure. A kiss would be an agreement of sorts, and he wasn't prepared to enter that particular contract yet.

She had other ideas though. Serenity wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned up to place her lips on his. They were soft and warm. Brandon hadn't been prepared for her to take the initiative. Now that she had, he was lost and there was no way of returning. He pulled her into his embrace and took over the kiss. Immediately, he became enraptured in the pleasure of all that was Serenity.

He pushed her lips open with his tongue and tasted her the way he'd been dreaming of. It was a mixture of cinnamon and brandy. Hot and enticing all at once and more decadent than the most succulent desserts. How had he resisted her this long? He could have been kissing her every day for months. The more he tasted, he realized one important thing: he was a bloody fool...

Chapter 3

His kiss seared through her. Serenity had never doubted it would, but the reality was entirely different than her imagination. When she'd initiated this, she hadn't imagined she'd be so swept away. Now she couldn't stop the onslaught of passion even if she wanted to. It served a dual purpose anyway. As long as he was in his study at Branterberry kissing her, he couldn't be on the road traveling toward Manchester.

The duke pulled back and stared down at her. His breathing was ragged and his expression appeared contemplative. Why had he stopped? If she'd been in his place, she wouldn't have had the strength to do so. She had to shake off the fuzziness filling her brain and concentrate on him. Something wasn't right, and she wouldn't be able to determine what until she read his aura. That kiss had been consuming for both of them.

Serenity blinked several times and pulled herself together. Branterberry swirled with every possible emotion. His aura was a veritable rainbow of color and uncertainty. That was the only time someone didn't glow a specific color. They had yet to make a decision on what to do. Her duke was confused as hell. Perhaps she should help him topple over in the direction she wished him to go.

"Stay with me," she said coaxingly.

He shook his head and stepped back. "I can't," he said hoarsely. "It's my duty..."

"The hell with duty," Serenity snapped. "There are more important things than solving the country's problems."

He laughed derisively. "Like tugging you on my desk?"

She wouldn't have put it that way exactly. Serenity lifted her chin defiantly. "Sex is a celebration of life. Tell me something, Your Grace," she goaded him. "When did you give up on your own happiness? Did you ever know that feeling?" He'd been willing to marry her sister without the benefit of love. What else would he do to avoid feeling something more than duty for a person?

There was so much about him she didn't know or understand. She

wanted to though. If he'd allow her inside his head for a little while, maybe she could figure him out. Every day he was swirled with secrecy and lies. He held everything inside of him and didn't allow anyone past that barrier he built. Whether it was to protect himself or another, she wasn't sure. Either way, he had to let someone in or he'd destroy himself from the inside out. Beneath that exterior was an edge of grief that held him back from truly living. Perhaps it was his wife's death, or maybe it was something else entirely. One way or the other, she'd uncover the information and free his soul from the endless torment.

"Careful," he warned. "You're treading on ground you have no business being on."

Too bad. Nothing was going to stop her from backing down now. His life depended on her ability to break through to him. "Why don't you let anyone in? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of nothing," he seethed out. "Least of all a woman who thinks she knows everything. All your declarations of seeing me—you see nothing."

On that score, he was right. She could tell when he was lying or holding back, but the real truth wouldn't or couldn't be known to her unless he chose to share it. He could keep his secrets from her forever if he wanted to. She hoped he wouldn't though.

"Enlighten me then," she shot back. "What exactly is it I'm not seeing? Maybe if I understood..."

"As if I'd ever tell you anything," he interrupted her. "I've had enough of this conversation. Go back to your time, Serenity. I don't need you here."

He spun on his heels and left the room. Her heart ached in ways she never imagined it could. His words were cruel, but deep down he didn't mean them. Something in their kiss had scared him into acting rashly. What had happened with his wife? How had she died? Maybe she should have asked those questions sooner. It might help her to figure out what was going on inside of his head. Either way, she had to stop him from leaving the castle. If he went to Manchester he could end up one of the unfortunate victims at St. Peter's field in a week.

How was she going to stop him without letting him know the results of the assembly that would gather there? Peterloo, as it was dubbed, was a massacre that spurred one of the defining moments of this point in history. It had to happen in order for England to move forward. As much as she hated the idea of people dying, there were certain things in history that needed to remain on the path it had already traversed. Those people's deaths meant something more for everyone. It was a sad truth, but she refused to let her duke be one of them. There was no way of knowing if he'd been there before or the

role he'd played. Maybe she should let him go, but do what she could to keep him safe.

She laughed... He'd hate that part. The duke was a brawny man who believed himself invincible. The idea of a woman being his savior would unnerve him. There was no way around it though. He was determined to go, so she'd make sure she was with him every step of the way. While she was at it, she'd find a way to dig around inside his head and figure him out. Times like these, she wished she had Genevieve's gift of telepathy. Maybe then she'd get a read on his thoughts at least...

Serenity sighed and headed to her chambers. Sconces of the finest metals decorated the wall of the hallway. At night, candles were lit to illuminate her path. A long, vibrant, red carpet with embroidered gold thread was spread across the floor. Every luxury available to a duke of the nineteenth century filled the house. She reached her bedchamber and pushed open the door. It wasn't the best room in the house, but she loved it all the same. It had a grand, four-poster bed with rich, blue velvet brocade. The large window pane pushed open to a gorgeous view of the gardens. A small vanity filled the far corner of the room and held her limited amount of beauty accessories. She'd never bothered with makeup and didn't miss it now, so all that laid on it was a brush and a box of hair pins.

She didn't have much, so it wouldn't take her long to pack. Which was a good thing if she hoped to surprise the duke with her decision to travel by his side. He'd probably forbid it if she gave him a chance. Relief flooded her now that she realized the path she had to take. He wouldn't die... She refused to lose him.



That had been close... Brandon had been seconds away from stripping Serenity bare and making love to her. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted a woman. She'd been more than willing and disappointed when he'd stopped. Ending it had nearly killed him. He still wasn't sure how he had managed to do it.

He cursed as he pushed open the door to his chamber halting short at the sight of his bed. Immediately, images of her there naked filled his mind. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to release the image from his mind. It was the best thing for her. She had to go home to the life she'd left behind. As much as he wanted to claim her

he couldn't. He was no good for anyone, and she'd come to resent him in time. It was difficult for him to open up to anyone. Keeping secrets had been ingrained in him for so long, he didn't know any other way of doing things. Somehow one little slip of a woman had become imbedded inside his soul. If she stayed even a moment longer, he wouldn't be able to let her go. This was her last chance to leave.

"Your Grace," Adley, his valet said. "How may I be of assistance?"

Brandon shook the thoughts away and turned toward Adley. "I need a trunk packed immediately. I'm leaving on the hour for a sennight."

He bowed. "I'll have it prepared posthaste."

Brandon should leave his room and give instructions to the household for while he was away. He didn't want to admit it—even to himself—but he was hiding. If he left his chambers, he ran the risk of running into Serenity before he left. As much as he craved to see her, he couldn't. It was better to have a clean break and leave her as a fond memory. One he'd never shake because she'd become important to him in a short time. Damn, he was a coward. When had he become this weak man?

Resolved, he exited his room and headed toward the front of the castle. He would speak to the housekeeper and make sure she had things well in hand. If Serenity was leaving as he'd instructed, he'd have to make sure Sebastian was taken care of. He really should look into finding him a new governess. When he returned, it would be at the top of his list.

Brandon made his way down the long hallway and took the stairs two at a time. He headed in the direction of the office Mrs. Simms used to do the household accounting. She usually could be found there at this time of day. He pushed open the door and entered to find the housekeeper steadily working.

"Mrs. Simms," he called out. The housekeeper turned at the sound of his voice. "A word please," Brandon said. "I'm leaving soon, and so is Miss Drake. I will need you to assign a maid to Sebastian's care while I'm gone."

"Yes, Your Grace," she agreed. "Miss Drake has already spoken with me. Milly will take her place until your return. If it pleases you, I can start interviewing a replacement governess while you're away."

Had Serenity suggested that too? She was really leaving... He'd told her to, but a part of him had hoped she wouldn't listen to him. His heart beat rapidly in his chest and a pain stabbed him with each breath he took. It wouldn't be the same without her.

"Yes, narrow down a list of candidates and I'll look them over when I return?"

Mrs. Simms nodded. "Very well, Your Grace. I'll send word to the

agency to send a few applicants over. When you return from your trip I'll have a shortlist waiting for you."

He hated the idea of hiring someone new to work with his son. "I should return in a sennight. Sebastian will be in good hands with you seeing to his care for now." Whomever they hired to be the new governess had some lofty shoes to fill between Genevieve and Serenity. They had both done well with his son's education.

"Very well," the housekeeper said. "Is there anything else?"

He shook his head. "No. I trust you'll keep the household running smoothly in my absence."

"Of course," she agreed. "You may count on it."

Brandon nodded and went in search of his son. He was playing in the nursery with Serenity. His heart stopped at the sight of her there. If only things could be different... Maybe they could have been together and had children of their own. He frowned. Where had that come from? He didn't want any more children. At least, he'd always believed that. With Serenity, it could've been anything, the possibilities were endless. Perhaps in another life he could have had a chance with her.

"I have to go away," Serenity glanced up and met Brandon's gaze, then turned to Sebastian and said softly, "But don't worry. You'll have the best possible people here with you."

"No," Sebastian said. "You stay."

She smiled and caressed his hair. "I wish I could, poppet. Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to. One day you might understand that."

Sebastian pouted. "I want to come with you."

Serenity's smile wavered. She truly did care for his son. Perhaps he should interrupt their conversation before Sebastian became too upset. "Another time," she said. "Be a good boy for me, won't you?"

Another time? She shouldn't be getting the boy's hopes up. If she was going back to her time, there wouldn't be other trips for her to take him on.

"Sebastian," Brandon said. "Come give me a hug."

The boy leapt to his feet and ran over to him. He wrapped his little arms around Brandon's waist and held on tight. "Are you going too, Papa?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "But don't worry. I'll be back before you have a chance to miss me."

He loved his little boy. Sebastian was the only good thing his wife had given him. Their marriage hadn't been a love match, and they'd fought more than anything. When she died, he hadn't felt anything but relief. That was something he'd never tell his son. As far as he would know, his mother was loved. Catherine hadn't been a bad

person. It wasn't her fault he'd been unable to truly love her.

"Promise," Sebastian said.

"Always," Brandon assured him, tousling his hair.

Brandon stepped away from his son. He made sure to keep his gaze averted from Serenity. He didn't know how her gift worked exactly, but he didn't want to unwittingly give her ammunition to use against him. If he had any chance of letting her go completely it had to be a clean break. He turned and walked out of the room and didn't look back once. Pain settled into his gut, and he accepted it as his due. In time, he'd become accustomed to it too. As with all things in his life he would find a way to endure. He was the one to make the hard choices for a reason. Serenity would go home, and he'd go to Manchester.

Maybe if he reminded himself often enough he'd believe it...

Chapter 4

Brandon opened the carriage door and stepped inside. He sat and

rapped on the side to let the driver know he was ready. The wheels rocked forward as the horses pulled the carriage away from his home. He leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. He'd been so close to making one of the biggest mistakes of his life. He wasn't sure how he'd managed to remain strong as long as he had.

It had taken a little longer than he had anticipated for everything to be prepared for his departure. A whole hour had passed after he left his son's nursery. The entire time he'd itched to search for Serenity and kiss her one last time. When he returned, she would not be there and it hurt more than he thought it would. No matter how many times he reminded himself it was for the best, he couldn't shake the feeling he'd lost something profound.

There was no going back now. He'd pushed her away, and now he had to live with those consequences. What choice did he have? He couldn't very well marry her and make her a duchess. She'd make a horrible lady in society. Hell, society would thumb their noses at her. Serenity wouldn't give a damn what they thought, and she'd continue as she pleased. Admittedly, it was one of the traits he admired most about her. She was the most self-assured woman he'd ever met. Perhaps she wouldn't have made a terrible duchess. It was more he'd have made a dreadful husband.

"Hell," he muttered. "I'm turning into a maudlin female."

He scrubbed his hands over his face and considered his options. If he turned the carriage around and went after her, he'd be delayed. What was more important? His feelings or his country's stability? In another time, that wouldn't have been a question. He would dismiss his personal life and do what he had to for king and country. Something inside of him changed irrevocably when he'd met Serenity though. The heart he'd believed dead had come to life.

How long had the carriage been moving while he contemplated what he wanted? He stared out the window and took in his surroundings. He'd been lost in his own mind so long, they'd

journeyed a good distance from his home. At least an hour had passed. Brandon sighed. There was no going back now. She might not even be at the castle. He wasn't sure what she had to do to return home. Serenity might already be back in her own time.

The carriage slowed down and stopped jerking Brandon from his thoughts. What was going on now? There was no reason for them to stop, and he sure as hell hadn't given them any indication he wanted to. Were there highwaymen on the road? He reached underneath the carriage seat and pulled out a pistol and cocked it. The carriage door flew open, and he prepared for the worst, holding his weapon steady. He was ready to fire, and only his training held him back from doing so—and it was a good thing he had. To his surprise, a woman with mahogany red hair and cobalt blue eyes greeted him. She was dressed scandalously in men's breeches and a waistcoat that hugged her breasts.

"Serenity," he said harshly. "What the bloody hell are you wearing?"

She glanced down at her attire and then back at him. "That's all you have to say?" She shook her head in bewilderment. "Not what are you doing here or it's good to see you. The first thing that pops out of that mouth of yours is to berate me on my clothing?"

Brandon opened and closed his mouth several times. She did have a valid point. He'd been so shocked to see her dressed in man's clothing he hadn't stopped to think about *why* she was there. She shouldn't be, but he couldn't find any reason to be mad about that. He'd been contemplating returning for her, and if he hadn't wasted so much time in indecision, he'd have done so.

"One exceedingly disastrous dilemma at a time," he replied. "I can't take you anywhere wearing that." He waved his hand up and down, gesturing at her clothing. "Who do you think you're fooling with it? Anyone with eyes will be able to tell you're female."

She grinned. "I fooled you long enough to get this far."

"No," he said evenly. "You didn't. I saw through it immediately." Hadn't he?

"If you had, we wouldn't have made it this far," she replied a little too proud of herself. "Since I was sitting next to the driver when you stepped into the carriage."

Had she? Brandon hadn't taken a second to look at the driver's box. He'd been too focused on escaping as fast as possible. It wasn't until he was inside the carriage he'd reconsidered his actions. He couldn't very well admit that to her now. She'd crow about it, and he'd have to do something to quiet her. That would lead to kissing, and well, kissing led to other things. Brandon closed his eyes and prayed for strength because suddenly he had ideas of how they could

pass the time in the carriage. Serenity probably wouldn't do anything to discourage those ideas either.

"I was a tad preoccupied," he replied dryly. "Or I would have most certainly noticed you."

"You're probably right," she said hopping into the carriage closing the door behind her. She rapped on the side and it started moving once again. "And I unashamedly took advantage of it. I'm not going to apologize, so don't ask me to."

How could he when he was glad she was there? He had time to figure out exactly what he wanted now. She wasn't returning to her time as he stupidly had suggested. Serenity schemed more than he did. Something he hadn't thought possible. She was his match in more ways than one.

"I'd expect nothing less from you," he told her. "When have you ever apologized for anything?"

His lips twitched as she stared at him. Her face was so open. Every emotion traveled across her features in succession. First her eyes widened in surprise, then they narrowed in puzzlement, followed by a nod of acquiescence.

"You're right," she said. "I don't make excuses for who I am. You either accept it or you don't." She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. He couldn't get used to her in breeches. "Why are you so tolerant of my presence? I expected rage and orders to return. This quiet acceptance is unnerving."

He shrugged. "I can't very well do anything to change our circumstances now. You've managed to maneuver us into a scandal. I suppose that won't matter much once you return home."

She snorted. "There is no scandal, Your Grace." Serenity leaned back against the seat. "At least not yet. We can rectify that at the first opportunity."

Wouldn't she be surprised if he decided to accept her offer? He might decide to test those waters at a later date. At the moment, he was enjoying having her along for the ride. The journey to Manchester would be long and boring. They had several stops before they reached their destination. Changing horses, resting, and at some point, stopping entirely for the night. He didn't plan on traveling once dark set in. There was no need to rush—yet. Now that Serenity was with him, he'd take a slower pace and figure out how he wanted to proceed with her. Instead of pushing her away as he often did, it was time to take a different tact.

"Nothing you say shocks me anymore," he said. "You can cease trying."

She laughed. "Believe it or not, every word I utter doesn't have to do with you. I don't utter statements with the pure desire to see how

you react.” She bit her lip and then said, “That’s just a side benefit.”

Brandon stared at her mouth, intrigued. He wanted to reach across the carriage and pull her into his lap. Then ravage her mouth with his until they were breathless with desire. His cock ached inside his breeches. He hadn’t been a randy youth who sampled a lot of different women. Perhaps if he had, he wouldn’t be in the state he currently found himself in: one breath away from losing control over a slip of a woman.

“My dear,” he said without an ounce of emotion. “One day I’m going to do something that will shock you. Then we will see how much you enjoy—” He paused a moment. “What did you call it? A side benefit?” Brandon lifted a brow. “On that day, I’ll have the last laugh.”

“Promises, promises, Your Grace.” Serenity grinned. “I look forward to your attempt.”

He wanted to wipe that smug smile off her lovely face. There was one way he could do that. If he gave in to his need to kiss her, she wouldn’t be lifting her lips in self-satisfaction. No, she’d be using them in much more pleasurable ways. The idea was starting to sound rather enticing, and he almost gave into it.

“There will be no attempt,” he said assuredly. “It will be nothing but success.”

If there was one thing Brandon was good at, it was hatching schemes that ended in victory. He played to win and had the patience to see a plan through. At the conclusion of it, she’d fall in line and go down a path of his design. Then she wouldn’t be teasing him relentlessly. When he won, and he fully intended to, she’d realize he was capable of turning the tables on her.

“As I said,” she told him. “I’m all aflutter waiting for you to pull one over on me.”

“You do say the strangest things,” he replied. “Since you’re here, why don’t you tell me why you felt the need to sneak into the carriage.”

“Would you have let me come along if I’d asked?”

He frowned. “No, of course not.” She was safer at the castle. Bringing her along into danger was a bad idea. Surely she understood that. She’d implied there was danger in Manchester and refused to give him any information he could use. She, more than him, knew exactly what she was heading into. It still irritated him that she declined to share vital details with him. Whatever bad things were about to happen, he could prevent it, but not without her giving him facts to work with.

She shook her head and sighed. “Then why are you wasting our time asking a question you already know the answer to?”

“Fair point,” he agreed. “Explain to me why you disobeyed me?”

He realized his mistake in his choice of words immediately. Her lips pursed into displeasure and her cheeks flushed a bright red. “I’m not yours to order around.” Serenity kicked him hard in the shin. “You’re lucky I like you or I’d do something worse.”

Brandon rubbed his leg and hoped he never figured out what worse was. That had bloody well hurt. “Fine,” he said. “I will try not to order you around. I’m not making any promises though. It’s in my nature to do so.”

She nodded. “I know,” Serenity said, resigned. “Still not going to allow you to get away with it on a regular basis. Why don’t we agree to disagree for now? We can discuss your stupid plans to go to Manchester and why it’s a bad decision later. I’m tired and plan on taking a nap until we reach our first stop.”

Brandon opened his mouth to disagree with her, but held back. He had no desire to receive a kick to his other leg. She was right. They could table their discussion for now. If she was truly going to nap, it would give him time to think and plan. He couldn’t resist goading her one last time though. “Carriages aren’t the most comfortable places to rest.”

“I can sleep anywhere,” she replied. To prove her point she curled up on the bench and closed her eyes. A few moments passed, and then her soft snores filled the carriage. He was almost jealous of that ability. She was lovely even in sleep. The male attire had to go though. As soon as they stopped, he was going to insist she change. If she even had anything to change into... He couldn’t be certain if she planned that far ahead. She’d thought to change into scandalous clothing, but probably failed to realize she might need proper garments later on.

He couldn’t wait for them to reach the last stop for the night. Serenity didn’t know it yet, but she was going to be his. In every way possible... He was done fighting himself.

If he needed a sign to claim her—this one glared brightly before him like a beacon of divine will. The thought of losing her forever opened his eyes. He’d been resigned to never seeing her again, but she didn’t listen to him and return home. Brandon would not let her go a second time. If she didn’t want to stay with him, she shouldn’t have stayed. Besides, it would be much easier to protect her if he kept her close to his side. He would even use that as an excuse if necessary for them to share a room. Somehow, he doubted she’d fight him on it though. Serenity had been baiting him for months to do the very thing he planned on. It would be a night neither one of them would forget.

Chapter 5

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of an inn. A sign swung over the door with the name “Stallion and Snapdragon” emblazoned on it. The building was in the central courtyard of the town. A tall arch sat in front of the road leading toward the coaching inn. A stagecoach pulled away, leaving dust in its wake. Serenity wrinkled her nose and fought a sneeze.

“What town is this again?” Serenity asked. She was tired and couldn’t wait to stretch her legs. They’d stopped earlier in the day and he’d made her change into a dress. She hadn’t bothered to pack, well anything. There hadn’t been much time to change and stow away on the carriage, let alone pack a trunk.

The duke had glared and then stomped away from her. He’d returned with a gown he somehow managed to purchase. She wanted to know who he’d managed to talk out of their clothing; it made her feel a little guilty for not thinking ahead. At least they were compensated for their loss... The dress didn’t fit her as well as she’d like, but she couldn’t complain, considering.

Hell, of course she could and would every opportunity she found. The duke could’ve let her wear pants. They were more comfortable and easier to travel in. These skirts were too long and she tripped over them when she walked. Did that matter to the pompous jerk? Not one iota. Whenever she brought it up, he claimed it was unseemly for her to travel as a man and he’d not have people staring at them. It would call undo attention to them. She managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. She didn’t tell him that they’d stare no matter what. He was an imposing figure and he drew attention by breathing. Now they were in another town and another coaching inn. Was it too much to ask they stay at this particular one longer than the time it took to change horses?

“Pendlebury,” Brandon finally replied. “We will stay here for the night and travel to Swinton in the morning.”

Thank the Lord...

“The inn has an unfortunate name,” she replied. “What on Earth

possessed them to give it such a ridiculous moniker?"

The duke laughed. "I'll let you figure that out for yourself."

He pushed the carriage door open and then offered her assistance out. Serenity tripped over the hem of her skirt and fell into his arms. Skirts were going to be the death of her one day, especially this particular one. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he twirled around to set her on her feet.

"Thanks," she said, brushing down her skirts. "Though I feel the need to point out this wouldn't be an issue if you'd allowed me to remain in pants."

"Ladies don't wear male clothing," he replied. "I'm not going to keep repeating myself."

"And yet you do," she retorted. "Why stop now?" Serenity lifted a brow. "You do it so well."

The duke didn't bother to answer her taunts. He brushed past her and headed inside the inn. She was left with two choices: wait outside or follow him inside. There really was no reason to remain where she was unless she wanted to breathe in more dust. The constant traffic didn't leave much to be desired. It had to be better in the Stallion and Snapdragon. Serenity stepped through the door and halted. The inside didn't look like a normal inn. If she were honest, she didn't know what to expect from an establishment with the name Stallion and Snapdragon, but what she found certainly wouldn't have topped her list.

One side of the room had a tavern of sorts. A bar ran across the far wall with stools sitting in front of it. Several men sat talking to the server behind the bar. All of them had some sort of alcoholic beverage in their hand. A few tables were pushed to the side with sturdy chairs. The hardwood floor was stained in spots—probably from the abundance of alcohol spilled on it. Serenity didn't want to think about what else had landed on the floor to leave a permanent mark. The men were loud and jovial as they sloshed their drinks back. By the looks of their bright red cheeks, they were all well and truly drunk too.

Serenity shook her head and studied the other half of the room. It had small tables and delicate looking chairs lined up against the wall. Ladies sat drinking from tea cups and nibbling on an assortment of pastries. All of the ladies didn't appear to notice the ruckus on the other side of the room. Either that or they did their very best to pretend it didn't exist. The stains that littered the tavern side hadn't made their way over to the ladies' side of the room. Serenity was at a loss what to refer to it as. In her time, she'd have considered it a coffee shop, but without the coffee...

A waitress flitted between the two rooms, attempting to appease

all of the patrons. They really needed to hire more staff. The owners were working the girl too hard, and she looked ready to fall to the floor. Considering her constant movements back and forth across the two strange parts of the inn, Serenity didn't blame her.

"I'm in some version of *The Twilight Zone*," she muttered.

"Pardon me?" the duke asked. "I didn't hear what you said."

"It's nothing," Serenity replied with a wave of her hand. "Do you come here often?"

The duke seemed to be in his element in the room. His aura glowed brightly as he studied the area. Something about the place must be part of his plans. Was it a meeting place of some sort? It did have a chaotic element to it that would appeal to a spy. A clandestine encounter could go unnoticed in a place that didn't know if it was a place that catered to drunks or high society.

He shrugged and told her, "If my traveling brings me in this part of the country I like to stop in."

"Mmhmm." Serenity tapped her fingers together. "Care to tell me what we're really doing here?"

He glanced down, widening his eyes. "We're here to rest. I believe I've already explained this to you."

She wasn't buying it for a second. His aura burned brighter with the deflection. It wasn't a lie exactly. They did have to rest, but he'd chosen to stop at this particular inn for a reason. Serenity planned on figuring out what he was up to before they left. She was rather tired of him keeping her at arm's length. He'd realize soon enough she wasn't going to sit back and play the part of lady. Something he should have come to accept already. She had been living at his estate caring for his son for months. The only concession she'd given him was to dress the part of an eighteenth century lady. She couldn't change who she was even for him. She'd forever be a woman who fully believed in equality and the right to tread her own path—much like any female born in the twenty-first century and several decades before that.

"Your Grace," she said sweetly. "I'm not a simpleton, and you need to stop treating me as one."

"And if I don't?" he replied. He folded his arms over his chest and tilted his head. "What, pray tell, could you possibly do to me?"

She narrowed her gaze and considered her next move. The duke was a man of extreme patience. She might need to start adopting his methods. If she wanted to win, she had to be smarter. The whole time she'd been reacting to everything he did. That was no way to outmaneuver a master spy. Information was power, and her gift gave her the upper hand. If he wanted to challenge her, so be it. Serenity grinned and lifted her chin. "You'll have to wait and see."

A servant came over to them and bowed. "Your Grace, we have

your usual chamber prepared for you.”

Had he sent word ahead of time? How had they known to arrange it when they'd arrived mere minutes ago? Serenity had to admire a man who planned so far ahead. The duke appeared to think of every possible outcome.

“That is much appreciated Bogsworth,” the duke replied. “I trust it has been set to my exact requirements?”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Bogsworth said. He turned toward Serenity and asked, “Will you be requiring accommodations as well, my lady?”

The duke opened his mouth to reply, but Serenity beat him to the punch. “Not at all. I'll be staying with my husband, of course.” She looped her arm through his. “I so hate to be separated from him.”

It was his move now. Would he refute her claim or allow the lie to hold? The muscles in his jaw twitched. His mouth formed a thin white line for a moment, and then he allowed his lips to tilt into a smile. “Her Grace is correct,” he said. “We're newly wed, and it's the beginning of our honeymoon.” The duke turned toward Serenity and said, “Bogsworth is the owner of the Stallion and Snapdragon.”

That had to have been difficult for Branterberry to utter. Serenity almost felt sorry for the duke, but refused to waste that particular emotion on him. He was getting his just desserts. “Brandon...,” she said, tasting his first name on her tongue. She'd refused to use it before, hoping he'd ask her to do so. “...has been raving about your establishment for weeks. It's one of his favorite inns in all of England. I must say, I'm fascinated by its design. Wherever did you come up with the idea of dividing it into two different types of business in the common room?”

Bogsworth beamed at her praise. His aura brightened to a dark red as he started to talk about it. “It's my wife's idea. She thinks a lady should have a space of her own, even out in public. We're hoping to expand and have the rooms entirely separate at some point. Unfortunately, it can become rather loud at times when we're at full capacity.”

Serenity could see the potential. “And the name?” She still thought it rather unfortunate, but now that she'd seen the inside, it rather made sense.

“It represents my misses and me,” Bogsworth grinned. “I'm the, err...”

“Stallion,” Serenity supplied. No doubt he considered his wife the flower he plundered with his randy nature too. “And your wife must be a force of nature being compared to a flower that resembles the face of a dragon.”

The duke glared at Serenity. He gritted his teeth but remained silent during the exchange. No doubt once they were in private he'd

scream at her for impersonating his wife. She was actually looking forward to the exchange. She hoped it proved to be as riveting as she anticipated. She made sure to keep her attention on Bogsworth during their discussion. In reality, the duke held her in thrall and she hummed with awareness.

"Indeed, she is," Bogsworth said. "I'll make sure to introduce you to her before you leave."

What had they been talking about? Oh yeah, his wife. "I look forward to meeting her," she replied cheerfully.

Bogsworth nodded. "I'll have one of the serving girl's show you to your chamber."

There was more than one serving girl? Serenity glanced around. Huh. There was, but she realized why she'd thought otherwise. They were all dressed in a similar fashion and even had the same dark brown colored hair. They appeared to almost be interchangeable. She studied them and found minute differences. One girl had a tiny mole on her left cheek, and another had a dimple that appeared when she smiled. They may have similar coloring, but they were different if she paid attention.

"That would be lovely," Serenity said when the duke failed to acknowledge Bogsworth. Was he really that mad about her little lie? It wasn't like it would force him to wed her in truth.

Bogsworth strolled away and headed in the direction of one of the serving girls. The girl nodded as the owner spoke to her. Serenity glanced away from them and up at the duke.

"You can stop giving me the silent treatment any time now," she told him. "Spill it out and you'll feel all better."

"Oh, I'll be spilling something at some point," he agreed. His voice held an edge of amusement and warning—or maybe it was a promise. "And it will assuredly feel more than better when I do."

She gaped at him as equal parts surprise and exhilaration filled her. Did he imply what she thought he did? Excitement pooled in her belly and she tingled with eagerness. "Don't make me a promise you're not going to keep."

"I don't plan on it," he said. The duke leaned down and whispered in her ear. "What I do have in mind should have you running scared."

He nodded at her and then strolled away. *Fool.* She had no intention of running from him. She licked her lips and stared at him. He'd given her permission to touch him in ways she'd been dreaming about. Why would she willingly give that up? The duke might be trying to scare her, but he'd done the exact opposite. When she was alone in that room with him, she'd give him a night he wouldn't ever forget.

Chapter 6

Brandon strolled to the tavern side of the Stallion and

Snapdragon. He needed a damn drink. Maybe if he imbibed enough he'd be able to pass out and ignore the urges burning through him. The idea of stripping Serenity bare and kissing every inch of her wouldn't leave his mind. She'd pushed him too far this time.

He wanted her, but the more he thought about it, it wasn't a good time. They were on the brink of entering dangerous territory. Bedding her was the last thing he should be thinking of doing. Maybe once they were back at Branterberry... He shook the thought away. As much as he wanted her, he had to abstain until he could be sure she was safe. If she'd share what she knew, perhaps he could stop it and they could head home sooner.

He still couldn't believe Serenity had claimed to be his wife. What terrified him was that he liked the sound of it. The more time he spent in her company, the more he wanted her to stay with him forever. He'd prefer her to actually be his wife before he seduced her now that the idea had grown on him. Somehow, he doubted that would happen though. As much as he liked to think he could keep his hands off of her he realized that wasn't going to happen. Once they were alone in a room together it was inevitable. He gestured toward the bartender. The man came over to him immediately and asked, "Yes, Your Grace."

The Stallion and Snapdragon had a convenient location for a lot of his business, and he came to it more often than he liked to admit. The staff was accustomed to his peculiarities, and in a strange way it was comforting. He didn't have to explain anything to them because they already knew. Of course, on some levels, it wasn't good for anyone to have that much information on him. If they'd still been at war, he'd have been more careful. He didn't work in the war office anymore though. He did more domestic things these days. The home office sent him on other excursions to investigate. He had contacts all over the place, and the higher ups didn't have issues with utilizing them.

The mess growing in this part of the country didn't bother Brandon. Surely the gathering of the working class wouldn't result in

anything disastrous. That was a concern for another day; he had something more important on his mind, or rather, someone. He shook his head and returned his attention to the bartender. Generally, when he was at the inn, he didn't imbibe much, but his circumstances were rather different now.

"A brandy," he said. "Make it a double."

The bartender nodded and poured the amber liquid into a glass then handed it to him. Brandon downed it in one gulp and set it down motioning for the bartender to fill it again. He lifted a brow and did as Brandon asked.

"Having that good of a day?" A man sitting next to him asked. He had a slight Scottish brogue that inflected in his words.

Brandon turned to look at the man in question. He had long inky black hair, tied back with a leather band. His eyes were a dark brown that bordered on black. He'd never seen the man before in his life. That didn't mean the man didn't realize who Brandon was. Some men tried to find a way into his inner circle. This man could be a gentleman who aimed to become acquainted with a higher circle than he currently traveled in. He couldn't be certain until he conversed with him a bit. The truth was he could use someone to talk to. He had no idea how to handle a woman like Serenity. Oh, he understood how to make love to her and make her his in that regard. But outside of a bedroom—he was at a loss.

"I've had better," Brandon replied and motioned toward the man's tankard of ale. "No strong stuff for you?"

"Can't abide brandy," he replied. "Ale is a better drink, but if I have to drink something harder, its whiskey for me. My lands border Scotland and its easier to come by." He shrugged. "Besides, I prefer a clear head, and it takes longer to imbibe a whole tankard." He gestured toward Brandon's empty glass. "You keep swallowing your drink that fast someone will be carrying you out of here."

Sensible. Brandon liked him already. "That's the truth," he agreed. "I needed it though. After this one, I'm calling it a night."

"Female problems?" the man asked.

Brandon groaned. "The only kind that will drive a man to drink—well, debt might, but I don't have problems of that nature."

The man nodded. "I have one of those too." He frowned and then said, "Female that is. She appeared out of nowhere and has been an albatross around my neck ever since. She's clueless and needy."

Brandon barked out a laugh. Serenity wasn't like that. Sometimes he wished she was. It would be much easier for him to handle. "She can't be all that bad."

"Trust me, she is," he replied. "If I could find a family member of hers, I'd pass her off. But she claims she's an orphan and has

nowhere to go.”

Brandon frowned. “That’s rather sad. At least you’re not throwing her out to the wolves. A female needs protection.”

“Aye,” he agreed. “She’s lucky my mother raised me to be a gentleman.” He glanced across the room and frowned, then turned back to Brandon, “I’m the Earl of Thornbury, but you may call me Killian.”

“Duke of Branterberry,” Brandon said. He considered not giving him leave to use his first name, but he had a feeling they’d be friends before the night was done. “Brandon, if we’re going to use our given names.”

Killian smiled. “You sure?” He lifted a brow. “I can ‘Your Grace’ you ‘til you’re blue in the face if you like.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Brandon replied. “I have enough of that from the servants.”

There were a lot of benefits to being a duke, but sometimes he wished he could disappear. He woke up every day and did his duty. There was a certain freedom in knowing what he stood for and how he would go about his day. Some people weren’t that fortunate, even a few in his own class. Having a purpose gave him a reason to keep moving forward.

Killian chuckled. “It’s a hard life,” he said lightly. “But someone has to live it. Tell me about your lady troubles.”

He opened his mouth to tell him about Serenity, but found it difficult to come up with the right words to describe her. There were none appropriate enough to bring life to all that she was. “I’m not sure they’re problems or not,” he finally said. “It may be that I’m making it more difficult than I should.”

“Your Grace,” Killian said. “I believe the problem is that she has you under her spell. If you give me a wee bit more detail, perhaps I might be able to assist you in breaking it.”

Did he want to? He rather liked Serenity and wanted to explore what drew them together. Instead of telling his new friend that, he said, “She has dark red hair and eyes bluer than the sea.” He sighed. “I’m afraid spending the rest of my life with her will be a trial I may not survive.” Brandon was resigned to his fate. Serenity would be his wife in truth once they were done with their current escapade. He was certain she’d lead him on a merry chase forever, and he rather liked the idea of it.

“A wife has that effect on a man,” he said gravely. Killian frowned and then took a drink of his ale. His dark eyes narrowed as he stared across the room. “Is she, perhaps, the woman talking to my nuisance?”

Brandon turned and looked for Serenity across the room. She was in an animated conversation with a woman. The other lady had rose-

gold hair that fell in waves down her back. Serenity had her arms folded across her chest and her lips were pursed in displeasure. “She has a dark green traveling dress on,” Brandon said gesturing toward her. “And if your lady is the one with a light blue dress waving at her like a mad woman, then I’d say yes.”

The two women appeared to be arguing about something. He could be wrong, but they seemed awfully familiar with each other. As far as he was aware, Serenity wasn’t acquainted with anyone other than him. Her family was in the twenty-first century. She hadn’t had a reason to leave his estate and only associated with the people that resided there. At some point, she would meet others when they started to socialize. As his wife, she’d be required to be part of society and meet more of his acquaintances.

Brandon turned back to Killian and asked, “What are the chances they know each other?”

He frowned. “Aubriella said she didn’t have family or anyone to lean on. If she’s lied to me, I think its best I find out now.”

Bloody hell. This was going to be a mess.



“Brie,” Serenity said. “Shut up before you draw more attention to yourself.”

The last person she’d expected to see was her stepsister in the Stallion and Snapdragon. She’d been aware that Aubriella had gone through the mirror on some mission that only made sense to her. Trenton had explained it to her when they’d traveled back in time to save Genevieve. What she hadn’t realized was that she’d gone back to the same time as they had. If Serenity had, she would have tried to figure out where she’d gone.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Aubriella hissed under her breath. “You’re going to ruin everything.”

Serenity closed her eyes and silently counted to ten. They hadn’t had the best relationship growing up, and it hadn’t softened now that they were adults. She couldn’t really blame Aubriella. Serenity’s mother had treated her abysmally. “I’m not here trying to ruin whatever you have going on,” Serenity said. “It’s an unfortunate coincidence.”

“That explains absolutely nothing,” Aubriella said irritated. “If Killian realizes we know each other, he will insist I go off with you.

I'm starting to make progress, damn it. You can't let him figure it out."

Serenity didn't give a damn about this Killian person. Her duke was all that mattered to her. "If I promise not to tell him we're related through marriage, will you stop throwing a temper tantrum?"

Aubriella glared at her. "I can feel every emotion you're throwing my way." She gritted her teeth. "Can you roll some of it back before I punch you?"

"I dare you to," Serenity said. "It's been a while since I've had the opportunity to hit someone." Her stepsister was driving her mad. "I'm not the only one throwing heat. You're a bright red, and its glowing so bright it's pouring into me. Calm the fuck down."

Aubriella blew out a breath and Serenity mirrored it. Their gifts tended to feed off of each other. It was one of the reasons they'd not gotten along growing up. Every emotion was amplified tenfold. Now that Aubriella was calming down, Serenity could breathe easier.

"I'm sorry," Aubriella said. "I'm overreacting."

"You think?" Serenity spat out. "It's not like I intended..."

"To do?" Brandon asked.

Shit. How much had he overheard? The damn duke was too stealthy for his own good. She couldn't let him realize that she and Aubriella were acquainted. Whatever she had going on required ignorance on her part.

"She spilled her damn tea all over me," Aubriella said.

That actually had happened. When she turned to find her stepsister behind her, she'd fumbled the cup and spilled the darn tea down the front of her dress. Her light blue skirt was stained from it. She had been at a loss on what to tell Brandon when he approached. The tea stain was a good enough excuse. Nice save on Aubriella's part too. Serenity was afraid she'd have kept opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water. She couldn't recall the last time she'd been at a loss for words. Finding Aubriella at the inn had ruined her composure.

"I didn't mean to," Serenity said. "She startled me. I didn't realize anyone was behind me."

Brandon frowned. A man stood directly behind him. His scowl matched her duke's as he stared at Aubriella. Was he the Killian her stepsister had been talking about? He was gorgeous; no wonder Brie wanted to stay. Serenity couldn't blame her either. Hopefully their ruse fooled both men. After a moment, the duke let out a breath and sighed. "The dress can be replaced. There is no reason to argue about it."

"Easy enough for you to say," Aubriella scoffed. "I don't have many dresses as it is. How am I going to find the means to replace this one?"

Several ladies and a few men on the other side of the room had stopped to stare at them. Serenity made out several shades of curiosity glowing from them. They were probably hoping for a spot of entertainment, and lucky them, they were the evening's show.

"Lass," the other man said with irritation. "Stop making a bloody scene. I will buy you a new dress."

"No," Aubriella said defiantly. "I'm already a burden to you. Something you remind me of every day."

Damn, her stepsister was good. Aubriella normally didn't do the damsel in distress thing, but she played it to a hilt. What game was she playing with her guy? Serenity grinned and unclasped the necklace around her neck. It was a simple emerald pendant on a gold chain, a gift from her mother when she'd been in a generous mood. She didn't need it and it would help Aubriella. Serenity handed it to her. "Here, sell this and buy a few dresses."

"Oh, I couldn't," Aubriella said bringing her hand to her chest. "It must be dear to you."

Aubriella was aware where the necklace had come from. She must be reluctant to take it because of that. "I insist," Serenity said. "It will go to a good cause. I don't need it and you do."

Her stepsister took it reluctantly and closed her hand around it. "Thank you," she said softly. "I apologize for losing my temper with you." Her stepsister was truly sorry, but not for what the men believed. Serenity saw the truth in her aura. Brie was letting her know that her earlier outburst had been impetuous and begged forgiveness. Her stepsister turned toward the man beside the duke and asked, "Were you able to secure a room, Lord Thornbury?"

He nodded. "Aye," he replied. "A serving wench was supposed to show you to your room already." Lord Thornbury frowned and searched the room. "Where did she disappear to?"

"I wouldn't know, my lord," Aubriella said demurely.

Serenity covered her mouth in an attempt to hide her amusement. Aubriella had this man completely fooled. What would he do when he realized she wasn't this meek woman? She'd pay good money to see that unfold. It would be better than a soap opera cat fight.

Brandon crossed to her side and leaned down to whisper, "What exactly do you find entertaining, my dear?"

She hoped he didn't suspect anything, but somehow doubted she'd be so fortunate. Until he said otherwise, she'd assume he was clueless. Serenity reined in her need to laugh. "Nothing," she said. "Perhaps it's time to retire for the evening."

Lord Thornbury glanced in their direction at her statement. "Please don't let us keep you," he said. "Miss Byrne, give Her Grace back the necklace. I will provide what you need."

Aubriella glanced at her and lifted a brow as if to question Killian's statement. Serenity wasn't sure if it was to give the necklace back or his assumption she was married to the duke. Either way, she had to stop her stepsister before she gave up her own charade to correct him. Serenity glanced at the duke, who had narrowed his gaze on her and then glanced toward Aubriella. What was he trying to figure out by staring at them?

"That's not necessary," Serenity told Lord Thornbury. "She needs it more than I do. I gave it to her, and I refuse to take it back."

"You're too kind," Aubriella said evenly. "Perhaps his lordship is correct though and I should return it."

What game was she playing now? Serenity glared at her stepsister, sick and tired of it all. "I don't have the patience for this," she blurted out. "Keep the damn necklace, Miss Byrne." Then she turned toward Lord Thornbury, and said earnestly, "I wish you luck, my lord. I fear you'll need it."

Then she spun on her heels and left her stepsister to her fate. She was exhausted, and all she wanted was to lay her head down to rest. The excitement of finally seeing the duke naked was even fading. She didn't bother to find out if he was following behind her. If he wanted her, he knew where to find her. Her interaction with Aubriella drained her, and she had to recharge. The duke could wait a little longer...

Chapter 7

Brandon followed behind Serenity as she headed toward their

room at the inn. He wasn't entirely sure if she knew where she was going or had stormed off in a fit of rage. He couldn't wait to get her alone and interrogate her. There was more going on in that little scene they'd left behind them than the minx wanted him to be aware of. He'd suspected as much when he'd approached them, but the more the two women spoke he became even more certain of it. He'd been working clandestine meetings long enough to puzzle through them without much aid.

Serenity pushed open a door and rushed inside their room. When had she figured out where they were sleeping? Probably when he'd been engrossed in his brandy and conversation with Killian. He'd ask her about it later. There were more important things he wanted answers too at the moment. She stopped in the middle of the room and screamed.

"Couldn't hold it in any longer?" he asked sardonically.

She spun around and met his gaze. Her mouth fell open with surprise. She sighed and then said, "I didn't realize you were there."

"I gathered as much," he said, closing the door behind him as he entered the room. "You should learn to be a bit more circumspect, my dear. Always be aware of your surroundings and definitely make sure the door is secured before letting your indiscretions out."

"I've nothing to hide," she declared flippantly. "No need for caution of any kind on my part."

She sounded—sincere. Brandon studied her for a moment, deciding how to proceed. Serenity was hiding something; he'd bet his life on it. Something about her encounter with Killian's Miss Byrne wasn't right. He'd bet they were very familiar with each other. Serenity didn't realize the thin ice she treaded on. When Brandon was done with her, he'd have the truth of the matter. Slowly, he untied his cravat and stalked forward. If she wanted to play, who was he to deny her? This had been a long time coming, and fighting it had come to an end.

"My dear," he said as he pulled his cravat away from his neck and

twisted it in his hands. "I fear I must disagree with you on that."

Serenity took a step back. She licked her lips and glanced down at his cravat. He almost laughed in triumph at her harried gaze as she took another cautious step backward. She'd pushed him for far too long, and he'd decided to let his inner beast out. He couldn't wait to have her at his mercy.

"Whatever you're planning," she told him, taking another step backward, "isn't happening. I won't allow it."

Brandon grinned wickedly. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been this excited or had fun of any kind. Hell, he couldn't recall ever being this carefree. His entire life had been one serious moment bleeding into the next. This woman before him gave him something he'd never had and probably wouldn't find with anyone else. The chance to be free and enjoy life—it was a gift he never dreamed he'd have.

"You'll allow it," he said. "And you'll love every minute of it too."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "You can't make me do anything."

"I wouldn't even try," he replied. He almost laughed at her defiance, but held it back. Every step they'd taken led them to this point. There was no turning back now. "But you can't deny you want me any more than I want you."

Serenity hit the bed as she stepped back, falling backward. She flailed her arms wildly as she tried to regain her balance and failed. Even fate agreed she belonged in his bed. If he was hoping for a sign, he'd not find a more glaring one. He moved forward and stopped at the edge of the bed, his knees brushing against her legs. She glanced up at him, her lips tilted upward enticingly.

"You're right," she said. "It's about time you tumbled over the edge with me." Serenity sat up and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Do your worst," she demanded. "I'm ready for the onslaught of decadent torture you're promising."

He groaned and leaned down, capturing her lips with his. This woman was his in every manner. When the night was over there would be no denying it for him or her. They belonged together, and he'd fight anyone who stood in his way of claiming her. He deepened the kiss, their tongues dancing together as a consuming fire erupted between them. Serenity moaned against his kiss, urging him to give her more of him.

They had way too much clothes on, and he'd have to do something to resolve that issue immediately. As much as he hated the idea, he took a step back so he could remove her dress. She was ahead of him yanking the bodice down and pushing it past her waist. God above, she wasn't wearing a damn thing underneath it. If he'd known that, they might not have made it inside the inn. He'd have had her in the

carriage over and over again...

Brandon swallowed down a lump in his throat as she stood, pushing her skirts to the floor. She was gloriously naked. Her skin flushed to a delicate pink and he wanted to taste her all over. There wouldn't be much sleeping tonight if he had his way. The need to kiss every inch of her filled him. He reached for her, but she pushed him away.

"Not until you're naked too," she said and then demanded, "Strip now."

His nostrils flared at her command. He wanted to order her around and see how she took to it. It was a good thing he wanted to lose his clothes as much as she wanted him to; otherwise, he might've argued on principle. He yanked his shirt free from his breeches and pulled it over his head, tossing it on the floor. Serenity moved toward him and brought her hands up to his chest. She rubbed his taut muscles beneath her palms, making him groan with each stroke.

"You're killing me," he said.

"Not yet," she replied. "But maybe before the night is done..."

He reached up and stilled her movement. "I thought you wanted me to undress."

She glanced up and met his gaze. Heat radiated from her in waves and washed over him. Whatever he'd done to deserve this woman, he hoped he lived up to it. Serenity Drake was perfect for him in every way. Slowly, he stepped back and removed the rest of his clothing. He felt the absence of her heat immediately and craved it in ways he never would have believed possible. His cock jutted out in anticipation of filling her.

Serenity moved toward him and wrapped her small hand around his length. He groaned loudly as she stroked him between her nimble fingers. She'd be the death of him yet. "Please," he moaned.

"You like this," she said. "I bet you'd like my mouth even more."

Shock filled him at her words. Would she really do as she suggested? He didn't beg her or she might not do as she implied. He wanted to feel her lips wrapped around his hard cock. Brandon had dreamed too often of her doing it and didn't dare believe it would ever happen. This was all so damn good and more enjoyable than he could have imagined. He waited patiently for her to kiss him as she promised. Anticipation was almost as pleasurable as the real thing... At least he'd thought that until her tongue brushed across the head of his cock. He almost climaxed from that alone but somehow managed to hold it in. Brandon didn't want to find release until he was buried inside of her.

Serenity dragged her tongue down his length and palmed his sack in her other hand. He was losing his mind to her ministrations. She

brought her hot mouth down his length, driving him to the brink of exploding. He had to stop her now before he couldn't. He halted her movements and pulled away from her.

"That's enough," he said hoarsely. "It's my turn now."

Serenity grinned. "You don't like being at my mercy."

He liked it entirely too much. That was the problem. "Darling." He smiled down at her. "One day I'll let you finish me that way, but I've been waiting too long to have you underneath me. I'm not going to deny myself that particular pleasure."

Brandon lifted her up and set her fully on the bed. He hadn't lied to her earlier. He was going to drive her to the brink of insanity. There were answers to be had, and she was going to give them. That didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the process and have her screaming with pleasure along the way. He grabbed his cravat and tied her hands to the headboard. She yanked at them and glared in his direction.

"Is this necessary?"

"Yes," he said. "I can't have you running off until I'm through with you."

Besides, he rather like the sight of her tied to the bed. It made his cock harden further in anticipation. Serenity pulled at the binding again. She could try all she wanted to, but there was no way she'd free herself. He'd been schooled in proper knot-tying at a young age. She wasn't escaping until he was ready to let her go.

"This is not what I had in mind," she said. "You don't play fair."

"I never promised I would," he retorted. "Now, where were we? He skimmed the edge of her breast with the tip of his finger."

Her skin was still flushed a nice pink. She liked this development as much as he did. "You're about to untie me." Serenity licked her lips. "I want to touch you."

He laughed. "You already did." Brandon joined her on the bed. "I promise this will be pleasurable."

Her answer was to stick her tongue out at him. His lips tilted upward. Soon she'd be screaming in pleasure, and her tongue would find other uses. He brought his hand up to her breast and pinched her hard nipple. Serenity's groans echoed through the room. That was a start, but it wasn't enough. He leaned down and drew the nipple into his mouth. She started to thrash underneath him. Brandon moved to her other nipple and repeated his actions, but this time he brought one of his hands down to caress the heat at the center of her thighs. He stroked the swollen nub, making her moan louder with each movement.

"Oh, yes," she called out. "More, I need more."

He stopped immediately. She wasn't allowed to find release yet. Not until he gave her permission. "How bad do you want me to

continue?”

“Damn it,” she shouted. “Why are you doing this?”

Brandon leaned down and kissed her chin and then pressed his lips to hers. She lifted her head and met the kiss fervently. He had yet to kiss her between her thighs, and he intended to before the night was over. This was a taste of all he’d wanted from her. He pulled back and stared down at her. Her dark red hair was splayed against the pillow enticingly. She was so damn beautiful.

He brushed his fingers across her delicate flesh. She pressed her core against his palm, attempting to rub herself against him. “Not yet,” he said.

“Please....”

Brandon pushed a finger inside her channel. She moaned as he stroked her core. “Do you want me?”

“You know I do,” she moaned out the words.

“Bad enough to tell me what I want to know?”

Her eyelids fluttered open, widening at his words. “Is this all a game to you?”

“Everything is in life,” he conceded. “But you’re more than that. It’s in my nature to question and hold back. I don’t want that with us. If we’re going to do this, we need full honesty.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “Tit for tat?” Serenity pressed herself against him, pushing his finger deeper inside of her. She was so wet for him. “I open myself wide, and you’ll do the same in return?”

Not how he’d have said it... “Yes,” he agreed. “When it’s all said and done, we’ll be stripped even more bare than we are now.” He pulled his finger from her tight channel.

“After,” she said. “Fuck me and then we will unravel each other’s mysteries.”

Brandon reached up and untied the cravat freeing her arms, then joined her on the bed. She sat up and brought her hands to his face, stilling him long enough to kiss him. It fueled his desire to an unbearable degree. He pushed her thighs up and settled himself between them. When he pressed himself inside of her, he groaned as her heat wrapped around his cock like a hot glove. Their first coupling was hot, fast, and exploded through them. Later he would go slower and savor the moment. He couldn’t hold on long enough to do it this time.

When his climax hit, he wasn’t even sure if she’d found hers, but prayed she had. Never in his life had he been this selfish, and he hoped she’d forgive him for it. He needed her too much and now that he had her... Lord save the fool who tried to take her away.

Chapter 8

Serenity curled against Brandon. She could think of him that way

now. It was more than testing out his name on her tongue. They'd transcended that and taken whatever this was between them to a different level. Formalities had been tossed aside when they'd decided sex trumped everything else. She couldn't regret that decision. Her entire body hummed with pleasure. The urge to stretch like a cat and purr filled her. Nothing compared to what this man made her feel. If there was something better out there, she hoped she never found it. She wouldn't be able to survive the aftermath. This encounter had already nearly decimated her.

She trailed her fingers across his chest playfully. "We should've done this a long time ago."

He chuckled. "We weren't ready," he said. "Or maybe I wasn't."

That she could believe. She read his aura to make sure he was as happy as her. His color had changed, and he was no longer shrouded in cleverly hidden deceit. This man had opened up to her, and she wasn't entirely sure it was a conscious choice. He'd claimed there would be no more secrets between them, but this was different. His aura almost reached out and claimed her. That had never happened before. He'd finally realized they belonged together. It had been a battle from the first moment they met, but one well worth the effort.

"Perhaps," she conceded. "Before all of this..." She waved her hand over their nakedness. "You had questions. If you want to ask them, now is probably a good time. I'm feeling rather generous."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her until all thoughts left her. If he continued that kind of mad passion, she'd not be able to string two words together. Every touch turned her insides to jelly. Her duke, always and forever. She rather liked that idea.

He pulled back and ran his hand through her hair. "I do have some things to ask you," he said. "Some of them are rather important to me. But before we get to the life-changing ones, why don't you tell me about Miss Byrne?"

She scrunched up her nose. Aubriella was the last thing she wanted

to talk about. Serenity suspected he already knew on some level what her connection to her stepsister was. She might as well get it out in the open and tell him what he wanted to know. Although, the idea of it still didn't sit well with her. Her stepsister was up to something here, and she didn't want to spoil it. She didn't generally hatch schemes. That was more Serenity's area of expertise. Aubriella, for all her hissy fits, had a good heart and meant well.

"Must we talk about her?"

His lips tilted upward. "How is she related to you and Genevieve?"

Serenity sighed. If only Lord Thornbury hadn't mentioned her last name. She should have realized once he uttered it that Brandon would latch on and not let go. That had been the turning point of the conversation. Before that, she'd bet everything that they'd fooled both men. Brandon was more astute than most, but even he wouldn't have doubted Aubriella's ire if not for her last name.

"She's Genevieve's cousin," Serenity finally said.

He lifted a brow. "No relation to you? I somehow doubt that, especially with the news you dropped on Genevieve before she returned to your time."

Before Genevieve had left with her true love, Trenton, Serenity had begged her to save their sister, Peyton. Genevieve hadn't known they were half sisters, and she'd had to convince her. There wasn't a lot of love between the four women. Peyton and Serenity were as close as two sisters could be. They'd excluded Genevieve and Aubriella at every opportunity. Now that they were adults, it was a regret both she and Peyton carried with them. Peyton had been sure Genevieve would forgive them both and help save her. She had cancer and Genevieve was a match to give her the transplant she'd needed desperately to live.

"Brie isn't related to me in the way you're thinking," Serenity said. "She really is Eve's cousin. I'm only related to her through marriage—there's no blood connecting us. Well, unless you count Eve."

"That's rather confusing," he rubbed his temple. "Explain in more detail."

Serenity took a deep breath and prepared to lay out the details. It was rather complicated and she wasn't sure she could aptly clarify it for him. "The short story is my mother married Brie's father. Brie's and Eve's fathers are brothers. Eve, Peyton, and I share a mother, but not a father." That was a mouthful to get out. "They're Byrnes and we're Drakes."

A part of her had been jealous of Aubriella and Genevieve's relationship to their respective fathers. Aubriella had lost her mother, but her father more than made up for it. Genevieve had her adopted mother as well. They hadn't lived under the influence of Nora Drake-

Byrne. Serenity's mother wasn't the warm and fuzzy type.

"Do you not get along with her?" he asked softly.

She frowned. "It's complicated." Everything in her life seemed to be...

The time for talking about her stepsister had passed. She was done with the subject for now. She didn't want to tell him any more. In some ways, it was too painful. Her blood sisters were in another time, perhaps bonding. A part of her would always ache for those lost relationships. She had a choice to make. Return to her time or stay with Brandon. Her heart hurt at the idea of leaving him, but it was equally painful to accept that she'd never see Peyton or Genevieve again.

Brandon stroked her nipple. She hissed out a breath. Was he trying to drive her mad? "Why don't we get this out so we can move on to more pleasant things," he suggested. "Tell me why she's here and what she's doing with the Earl of Thornbury."

Serenity swallowed the lump in her throat. Her heart raced in her chest as he continued to stroke her, heightening her awareness. "I don't know," she gritted out. "She didn't exactly have time to explain it to me."

"But you know something?" He trailed kisses along her jaw and sucked on her ear. His hot breath caressed her neck. "Tell me."

"I. Don't. Know." He was driving her mad. "All I know is she disappeared before Trenton and I came to your house in London months ago. She went through time on her own secret mission. It must involve the earl or she wouldn't have begged me to keep my mouth shut."

He lowered his hand to her clit and caressed it with the pad of his thumb. Her breathing hitched with each stroke. "Is that all?"

Serenity wiggled under his skilled hands. He had one hell of a way to interrogate a person. "I think it is time we turned the tables a bit," she said flipping on top of him. "Two can play this game."

He brought his hands up to her waist, circling them on her hips. "You want to ride me?"

"Not yet." She laughed. "You haven't been a good boy and don't deserve my attention." Serenity leaned down and licked his chest. "It's your turn to tell your dark secrets."

He groaned. "I don't have any to tell."

"Lies," she countered. "Do I need to remind..."

"No," he interrupted her. "Don't tell me that nonsense again. What do you want to know?"

He wasn't going to give up anything willingly. She wouldn't push too much; however, there was something bothering her. Brandon never mentioned his dead wife. There was a story there and it might

not be the best time to ask, but she couldn't let it go either.

"Tell me about Sebastian's mother," she demanded.

He closed his eyes and remained silent for several heartbeats. For a moment, she feared she might have pushed him for something he hadn't wanted to discuss. Had he loved her that much? Serenity had never truly lost anyone dear to her and hoped she wouldn't for a very long time. If she lost someone she loved, she might not handle it well.

For a while there she thought Peyton might die, and that had terrified her. If Peyton hadn't had the vision about Genevieve... She shook the memory away. Genevieve went home and saved Peyton. There was nothing to worry about. Both of her sisters would live a long and happy life. Peyton just needed to find her one true love and all would be right in the world. Serenity was happy with her choice to remain in the nineteenth century. The only sadness she carried was realizing she'd never see her sisters again, or be there when Peyton fell in love. Her future was with Brandon though. Her fate was in the past, and her sisters' were in the twenty-first century. Serenity made tiny hearts with her fingers on Brandon's chest as she waited for him to speak.

"Catherine," he finally said. "Was a frail woman. She had a good heart and she meant well, but I was never the right man for her. She'd have been far happier if she'd married someone—anyone—other than me. For a long time, I didn't think I was even capable of love." He trailed his fingers over her belly. "Until Sebastian was born, I thought I had no heart to give anyone. He stole it from the moment he let out his first breath. Unfortunately, his life meant Catherine's was at an end. She didn't survive the birth."

"That's so sad," she said. Now she wished she hadn't asked. It was rather tragic that Sebastian's mother never had the joy of watching him grow. And poor Sebastian—he desperately wanted a mother and might never have one. "I'm sorry I made you talk about it."

"It's all right," he said austere. "I said there would be no more secrets between us, and I meant it. You can ask me anything, and I'll do my best to explain it."

Something significant had changed between them. His words meant more than he was saying. He trusted her with all his secrets. This man was shrouded in them, and it was an enormous thing he was presenting her with. His life was in her hands, and she could do anything with it she pleased.

Her smile wobbled as she met his gaze. Tears were threatening to fall, but she managed to hold them back. The wave of emotions that washed over her were overwhelming. She loved this man more than she'd ever believed possible. "Ditto," she replied. "I like this no secrets thing." Though she kept one close to her heart. She wasn't ready to

say she loved him aloud. The time wasn't right—yet.

“Come here, pretty lady,” he said as he pulled her close. “Tomorrow we’re going to talk more, and you’re going to introduce me to your relation formally.” He kissed her jaw and then her lips. “Then we’re going to handle this mess in Swinton.” He pressed his lips to her ear. “And later, when everything is settled, you’re going to marry me for real.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words. Of course her duke would fail to actually ask her if she wanted to marry him. When he brought it up again, she’d make sure he realized the error of his ways. He must love her, or he wouldn’t insist on a wedding. That didn’t mean she didn’t want the words and promises spoken aloud. She certainly hoped he wasn’t being old-fashioned and thought sex meant he had to marry her. If so, she’d knee him in the balls. She wanted love or nothing at all. She didn’t want a man who’d believed compromising her virtue meant they were stuck together forever.

“If I could give you one thing,” she said. “I’d let you see you the way I do. The way you glow...” Her voice trailed off. He was missing so much that would simply amaze him. She adored the way he loved her.

He chuckled. “I’ll take your word for it.” Brandon lifted her and set her over his cock. “Now, you promised you’d ride me. Show me how skilled you are, my dear.”

She didn’t need to be told twice. Serenity lifted her hips and then pressed back down. He felt so damn good inside of her. This was something she’d never tire of. He closed his eyes and moaned loudly. She repeated the action over and over again until she was breathless from the exertion. He opened his eyes and wrapped his large hands around her hips, then helped her quicken the pace. His hips moved under hers until they were both rocking back and forth on the precipice of exploding.

“So good,” he groaned out.

Serenity clenched her inner muscles and was rewarded with his moans. He paid her in kind by rubbing her clit and she was the one filling the room with her sounds of pleasure. When she climaxed, the room spun and she couldn’t stay upright. He caught her as he fell into bliss with her. They rolled to their sides, holding on to each other tightly.

In some ways, she couldn’t tell where she ended and he began. She did know one thing for certain. Loving him was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she couldn’t be more grateful fate had led her to him. As long as she had him, she’d never be alone again. She’d finally found where she belonged and nothing or no one would take that away from her.

Chapter 9

Brandon woke and reached for Serenity. He hadn't slept that hard

or soundly in his life. He sat up abruptly when she wasn't anywhere to be found. He searched the room and it was completely empty. Where could she have gone off to? He swung his legs over the side of the bed and dressed as quickly as possible. Wherever she'd taken herself to, he'd find her. He didn't like the idea of her being off on her own. She might be an independent woman from the future, but she was still prey to the lesser parts of society. The brigands and thieves would think nothing of stealing from her or worse.

He rushed down to the common area of the inn. It was quiet, which wasn't much of a surprise. At this time of day people were either still sleeping or already on the next leg of their journey. The sun had barely risen in the sky and breakfast wasn't even being served. The tavern part of the Stallion and Snapdragon was closed until afternoon. The ladies' side had a few women sitting down for tea and a light repast. Serenity wasn't one of them. Brandon wasn't the sort to panic normally, but if she didn't appear before him soon, he might give into the urge.

"Your Grace," the owner of the inn said as he approached. "We didn't expect you to wake for a while yet. Your wife has been keeping mine company for an hour now."

Thank God. "Bogsworth, it's good to see you," he said. "Could you direct me to where I might find her?"

"She's in the back garden with the misses and the other lady."

The other lady could very well be Miss Byrne. Brandon nodded at Bogsworth and headed in the path as directed. He was anxious to see Serenity. When they were alone, he'd spank her for her impertinence. How dare she leave their bed without alerting him to it. If she'd mentioned it... Hell, who was he kidding. He'd have made love to her again and they'd both still be there. If she wanted to leave it, silently was her only option. Though that begged the question why she'd want to do so. There was supposed to be no secrets between them any longer. That was the whole point of bearing their souls to each other

through the night.

He found them exactly where Bogsworth indicated. Though the innkeeper's wife was nowhere to be found, Serenity and Aubriella were deep in conversation and didn't notice him. Slowly, he walked over to their side while neither one of them glanced up.

"No," Aubriella said. "It's not like that."

"I'm sure it isn't," Serenity said. "It never is."

Aubriella crossed her arms across her chest and stared at Serenity mulishly. "Have I ever told you I hate you?"

"Only a thousand times," Serenity deadpanned. "No need to elaborate now."

Brandon's lips twitched as he listened to them. They certainly argued like they were sisters. He cleared his throat, gathering their attention. "I hate to interrupt," he paused. "No, I actually mean to do just that." Brandon glanced at Serenity. "Care to make the introductions?"

She lifted a brow. "You have no patience, do you?"

"Not when I wake up alone," he said. "I had plans and you ruined them."

"Oh?" The corner of her mouth twitched upward. She seemed to be fighting a smile. "Fascinating..."

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. If her stepsister wasn't watching them with interest, he might have given into the urge. He could restrain himself a little while longer.

"If you two are done flirting," Aubriella said, "I have more important things to see to."

"Miss Byrne," Brandon said, stopping her from leaving.

"Doctor," she replied.

What the hell did she say? He was a little unnerved by her if he was being honest with himself. She had an ethereal quality to her. Actually looking at her, he could see why Killian thought she was fragile. Something about her made him want to wrap her up and make sure she was taken care of.

"Not you too," Serenity said irritated. "Don't stare at her that way."

He frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

Aubriella laughed. "He managed to shake it off," she told Serenity. "Only a man truly in love can do that." She held her hand out to him. "I'm Dr. Aubriella Byrne."

That was what she'd said earlier. He'd referred to her as Miss and she'd corrected him. Apparently that was a common occurrence in the future. Women had no trouble becoming doctors. The Duke of Weston's wife, Alys, was a medical doctor, but she didn't make a habit of making people aware of that fact. Brandon kept tabs on Weston

because of his former agent, Dominic Rossington.

“Right,” he said. “What kind of doctor are you?”

He had to ask. There apparently were different kinds in the future, and he didn’t want to make assumptions. Especially not with a relation of his future wife. He fully intended to marry Serenity as soon as he possibly could. He refused to let her go.

“Nothing that would be of any use to you,” she grumbled.

“Don’t be so fast to assume,” Serenity replied. “He’s here for the same reason you are.”

She lifted a brow. “Not the massacre...”

What bloody massacre? They were talking over his head again. What did the two of them know that he didn’t? He was supposed to be the premier spy, and these two were scheming under his nose. That settled it, he was losing his touch, and it was all Serenity’s fault.

“He didn’t know that part, you fool,” Serenity hissed. “You of all people must realize we can’t mess with history.”

Brandon was ready to strangle both of them. “Start talking now,” he demanded.

Aubriella sighed. “She’s right. I can’t tell you everything and neither can she. You might feel compelled to stop it, and it has to happen.”

The more they talked, the more irritated he was becoming. He hated when people withheld information from him. Nothing wound him up faster and made him want to pummel something. He couldn’t very well hit a lady though, so he clenched his fists at his side and refrained from punching anything. It was a hard-fought, internal battle, but he ultimately won in the end. He turned toward Serenity and said, “What happened to no secrets between us.”

“This isn’t the same thing,” she said. “It’s not my secret to tell, and it really will be what brings your country down the path it is supposed to head in. Even if I wasn’t here, or if Aubriella didn’t study history until she knew every last detail, it would happen. This isn’t something we did or will do. Knowledge of events from the past doesn’t give us the right to alter them, and in this case allowing them to happen will lead England down a path it must go.”

He was sick and tired of hearing that. In the twenty-first century, he’d long since stopped breathing, and this all might be history to them, but it was his present. If she hadn’t followed Trenton Quinn back in time, he’d never have met her. She wouldn’t have given him something to live for. He’d thought he didn’t have a heart once? Well, wasn’t it a surprise to realize it was because somehow he’d already given it to her. She owned him body and soul, and a part of him hated her for it. Because now every part of him was on the brink of ruin.

“That’s nonsense,” he said. “If you trusted me, you’d tell me and

let me decide for myself.”

“It’s not that simple,” Aubriella said. “What if we told you and we changed history for the worse.”

“What if it was for the better,” he countered. “Tell me what you know.”

Serenity blew out a breath. “It doesn’t matter now. He doesn’t have the means of arriving at St. Peter’s field in time to stop it. What’s going to happen still will. Tell him everything.”

Aubriella frowned. “There is a gathering today. On August 16, 1819, today if you will, they hope to meet peacefully. There is a faction that doesn’t believe that is possible and make an effort to curb the masses. They panic and people lost, or will lose, their lives—even more are injured. When the clock strikes two it will be over.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me this?” He spun to meet Serenity’s gaze. He was horrified she’d kept this to herself. He could have done something to stop the tragedy from happening. “Why would you willingly let people die if you could prevent it?”

She chewed on her lip. “I hate that people have to die. History is filled with people that do for no reason. Am I to travel everywhere and stop it all? Is that even possible?”

“No,” he said. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not responsible for the lives of everyone throughout history.” Why did she have to be so damn reasonable? He couldn’t argue with her when she had a valid point. He hated it, but he had to look at it from her position.

“Exactly,” she said. “This happened before I was even born. I had nothing to do with it. The only thing I’m responsible for is myself and the actions I take. You look at it as doing nothing, but look at it from my perspective.” She crossed over to him and placed her hand on his cheek. “I have to live with this knowledge every day. Sadly, a lot of people die throughout history. We can’t stop it all from happening and you shouldn’t expect us to.” Serenity threw her hands up in the air and paced back and forth. She stopped and faced him. “Because, otherwise, the future of my family and those I care about might be irrevocably altered. There’s always the chance that stopping something now will prevent me from ever being born.” She paused and nibbled on her bottom lip and then explained, “There is a butterfly effect and nothing goes untouched. My being here could change things in ways none of us could ever imagine.”

He hadn’t considered that side of things. He was being a selfish ass, but it was hard knowing people would die and they couldn’t do anything to stop it. Even understanding all of what she said, he wanted to rush to stop the massacre from happening. It was difficult for him to stand there helpless. How could they stand knowing so much without going insane? “Is this why you wanted me to stay at

Branterberry?"

"Yes," she replied. "I honestly didn't know Brie was here. She's been stalling Thornbury for days. He was hoping to go in support of the changes the working class want. She's been doing the damsel in distress act to slow him."

"I can't help people see me as fragile," she said. "I use the gifts I was born with however I need to." What exactly were her gifts? He frowned and shook the thought away. It was perhaps best he didn't know. He sympathized with Killian though. It sounded as if she was leading him on a merry chase.

"Quit projecting feelings on me," Serenity told her in annoyance. "I don't need an amplification."

Brandon had no idea what Serenity was talking about. He pushed his eyebrows together and stared at her. "What?"

"She's an empath," Serenity explained as she motioned toward Aubriella. "And a nuisance."

Ah... That actually made sense. Aubriella read emotions the way Serenity did auras. Spending time with the two of them made him appreciate his plebian status. He'd hate to live with any kind of psychic ability.

Aubriella blew her a kiss. "But you love me."

Serenity laughed. "I'm starting to like you. Don't push it."

Brandon wrapped his arms around Serenity. "Invite her to our wedding."

He couldn't wait to marry her and live the rest of his life with her by his side. She gave him something he'd never thought to have—love and happiness. He kissed her forehead and failed to notice her bewilderment.

"Oh," Aubriella clapped her hands. "I do love a wedding. When is the big day?"

Serenity pushed Brandon away. "Never, since I haven't been asked."

She stormed away, leaving Brandon stunned. What the hell had gone wrong? He thought they were on the same page. He mentioned marriage last night... Brandon blinked several times, and as his mind cleared, he realized his mistake. He'd ordered her to marry him. He was a bloody idiot. Of course she'd be mad at him. He'd assumed she wanted to marry him and forged ahead without asking her what she wanted. What if she didn't want to be his wife? God, he hoped she didn't plan on leaving him. The idea—terrified him. He had no idea how to chase after her through time. What would he do if she decided to go back to the twenty-first century? How would he live without her? He had to go find her and make this right before it was too late.

He turned toward Aubriella and asked, "How do I fix this?"

His soon to be sister-in-law grinned. “Grovel. You done fucked up.”

He’d never get used to the way they talked. Eve had said strange things all the time, so adapt to Serenity too much, but they all had unique phrases they’d spout that would throw him off from time to time. Maybe after a while he’d become more accustomed to it.

Brandon nodded. “I’m going to do just that. Do me a favor and don’t disappear yet. I do want to make sure you attend our wedding.”

With those words, he stalked after the love of his life. He was prepared to do whatever was necessary to make her realize how much she meant to him.



Serenity stormed into the room she shared with Brandon. How could he have not realized he was being so damn selfish? *Ohhh*—she wanted to hit something. If she didn’t love the jerk, she’d hit him. Heck, maybe she still would when she saw him next. She picked up a vase and threw it across the room. It splintered into thousands of pieces on impact.

A whistle echoed through the room. She spun on her heels and met Brandon’s gaze. He slowly shut the door behind him and approached her cautiously. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have asked if you wanted to marry me. I assumed, and I shouldn’t have.”

That was a nice start but she wasn’t ready to forgive him. That was not the only thing he’d been wrong about. He’d assumed she was heartless and wanted people to die because she didn’t tell him about the massacre at St. Peter’s field. It killed her on the inside that there were people there probably even now getting hurt.

“Not good enough,” she said angrily. “Do you think pretty words make everything all better?”

“Even if I give you all my love, it would never be enough,” he said quietly. “I’m only human and I make mistakes, but I refuse to give up on us. I love you, and I can’t imagine my life without you.”

Her heart melted at his words. Maybe she could lighten up a little bit. She did love him too... “I never believed I’d marry anyone.”

His face fell a little at her words. “You don’t want to marry me?”

That was the thing. She’d come so far with him. He made her different—better even. “I’m not ready to give up on us, but maybe it is for the best,” she said quietly.

“I don’t accept that,” he said. “If we love each other we can get

through anything. Please don't walk away from me. I might not survive it if you do."

He was destroying her with his words. Her love didn't get it. This had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her. She wasn't sure she should stay in this time. What if she made another misstep? Would he blame her again and push her away? "I love you," she told him. "I've never loved anyone more than I do you."

"Then what is the problem?" he asked. "Tell me so I can fix it. I want to be better for you."

She crossed the room and cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand. He was so dear to her, and it would kill her to leave him. "You don't have to do anything. You're perfect the way you are. It's me that doesn't deserve you. I should go back and be with my family."

"No," he shouted. "Please don't do that. We don't have to get married. It's enough for you to be here with me."

She didn't really want to leave him, but she also realized it might be the best thing for them both. If she stayed, he might ask things of her she was unable to give him. Serenity loved him more than she'd thought possible. It tore her heart to shreds at the idea of never seeing him again.

"I don't want to be someone who can walk away easily," she said. "But there is more at stake then you or me. What happens when another crisis pops up I could've prevented. Can you continue to look at me as if I hung the stars in the sky? Will our love survive that pressure?"

Brandon dropped to his knees and let his head fall onto her belly. He wrapped his arms around her legs, holding on tight. Silence filled the room, and she feared he'd started to agree with her. She was almost mad at him but let that spark of anger dissipate. As much as she wanted him to fight for her, she couldn't hold it against him if he agreed with her messed up logic.

"I promise to never ask anything of you that you can't handle. Our love not only will survive it will thrive." Brandon glanced up and smiled. "Do you want to know why?"

"Yes," she said.

"Because you and I are not people who give up," he said. "I'm not promising that life will be easy, but I can guarantee one thing. Any love worth having is worth fighting for and I will fight for ours until I breathe my last breath. Can that be enough for you?"

She nodded a tear falling down her cheek. "Of course." Serenity wiped the tear away with a quick brush of her hand.

He leaned his head back and met her gaze. His face was wracked with emotion. "Serenity Drake," he said quietly. "The love of my life and the one woman guaranteed to drive me mad by breathing. Will

you please do me the honor of becoming my wife? Promise to wake up beside me each day and kiss me every night before we go to bed. Be the mother of my son and future children, and argue with me when I'm being an arse?"

She stared down at him, stunned into silence. Was he serious? "But..."

"No," he said. "I realize I gave you permission to argue with me, but that's only after you've agreed to be mine forever. Until then, you will not do anything of the kind. We're meant to be together, and nothing you have to say will convince me otherwise."

A tear fell down her cheek. She dropped to her knees to hug him. He held on to her tightly and kissed the top of her head. How had she been so lucky to find him. "Yes," she said. "I will marry you."

"Good," he said. "I already started planning the wedding. I asked your stepsister wait for us in the garden, but I'm not sure if she will. I intend to ask her to stay for the wedding so let's hope she's still there." He grinned. "I'd hate to show up alone to our special day. She'll be awfully surprised to be a guest at our wedding. You wouldn't want to miss her reaction, would you?"

Serenity laughed and kissed him quickly. "You're that sure of yourself?"

"I started planning as soon as we arrived at the Stallion and Snapdragon. Did you really think I'd leave this place without you permanently attached to me?"

It was wonderful to finally be with someone she could be herself with. Life would never be perfect, but with Brandon, she found the one person who made her happy. There was nothing else she could possibly want, and she planned on treasuring each moment.

Chapter 10

The carriage rolled across the road, bouncing with each turn of the wheel. Brandon glanced across the carriage at his wife. He still wasn't used to thinking of Serenity as his, but everything about it was right. This wasn't his first marriage, but it was the one that equally scared and thrilled him. When he'd married Catherine, it had been about duty. Serenity was the love of his life. Taking a step toward her instead of away had been a profound one for him to make. His first instinct was to push people out of his life. Meeting Serenity was the best thing that had ever happened to him, besides the birth of his son. Loving her opened him up in a way he'd never believed possible.

"Must you sit so far away?" he asked.

Serenity giggled. "Yes," she replied. "I'd prefer to not arrive looking like a rumpled waif. If I go anywhere near you, my dress will be ruined."

She did make a solid argument, but he had one better. "The pleasure will be worth it." He winked. "I promise."

He was finding it more and more difficult to keep his hands off of her. Once he started to touch her he'd become addicted. Brandon didn't recognize the person he'd turned into.

Her lips tilted upward. "I'm sure it would be, but I'm afraid I must decline your enticing offer."

Brandon studied her and made a snap decision. He reached across the carriage and pulled her over to him, then lifted her up so her skirts fell over his lap and she sat over him. Images of her riding him filled his mind. He wanted that again. That shouldn't mess up her dress too much...

"Darling," she said. "This is rather wicked of you."

"But you like it," he replied. "Admit it."

"I do," she conceded, then nibbled on her bottom lip.

He stared at her enthralled with every aspect of her. He brought his lips to hers and captured them in a searing kiss. Brandon slid his tongue inside her mouth and deepened the kiss. Their tongues danced together in a tangle of need. Perhaps she'd been right to try to

dissuade him from doing this. He didn't want to settle for a quick tumble in the carriage. What he really wanted was to undress her and lay her across his bed so he could savor her for hours.

The carriage came to a halt suddenly, making Serenity tumble backward. He caught her before she fell off his lap and held her in place.

"What the bloody hell..."

He pulled the curtain back on the window of the carriage and peeked outside. How had he not known they were so close to Branterberry? It was a good thing he hadn't removed any of Serenity's clothing. They'd been caught in *flagrante delicto*...

"It appears we're home," Serenity said. "I think perhaps you should release me so we can go inside."

He hated the idea of letting her go, but realized she was right. There would be time later for him to make love to her. It would be much better where he could take his time. Besides, he hated the idea of anyone, even the servants, being a witness to their passion. Brandon didn't want to share that part of their relationship with anyone.

"If you insist," he said. "Let's go give everyone the good news."

Brandon stepped out of the carriage and reached inside to help her out. He'd made sure she had a new dress for their wedding. This one fit her properly and she didn't trip over the skirts. The sapphire blue matched her eyes and made them sparkle like the jewel the color represented. Silver embroidered roses swirled at the edge of the sleeves, hem, and bodice. Her mahogany red hair was twisted in an elaborate coiffeur with tiny seed pearls pinned like a crown at the top of her head. She was breathtaking and all his...

"Your Grace," Brandon said. "Are you ready?"

She brought her hands up to her lap and fidgeted. "I'm not sure I can do this? What will they think of me?"

He laughed. Brandon couldn't help it. Since when did she worry about what others thought of her? This wasn't the woman he married. The Serenity Drake he'd fallen in love with was bold, daring, and unafraid of anything the world threw at her. Now that she was the Duchess of Branterberry, she had the power to back that up. What had her running scared?

"My darling," he said softly. "They loved you before, so why would they hate you now?"

That was true. His staff had adored her from the moment he'd brought her to Branterberry from his London townhouse. No one would be disappointed she was now mistress of the house. They would probably all sigh in relief that he'd finally married again. Sebastian needed a mother, and there was no one better suited to the position

than Serenity.

"I was a governess before," she said. All the color drained from her face. "What if they think I trapped you or something. Duke's don't marry beneath them."

He blew out a breath. How had he not anticipated this? Serenity was the strongest female he knew. Brandon would never have believed she'd care for something he deemed trivial, but he'd do his best to ease her concerns.

"A duke does what he damn well pleases," he stated. "I love *you* and I'm not going to apologize for that. If anyone has a problem with my choice I'll gladly give them a letter of recommendation and send them on their way."

It angered him anyone would dare to question him. He wouldn't stand it from a servant, and he'd not do it with her either. She'd married him and there was no backing out of that now. They had to move forward and do their best to live their out their lives. He certainly hoped most of their days would be full of happiness, but wasn't stupid. There would be some moments of sadness from time to time.

"No," she said. "Everyone will stay." Serenity stood straight and lifted her chin. "You're right. It was a momentarily bit of foolishness. Let's go inside."

He wanted to sigh in relief but held it in. This was the woman he'd married, and he wouldn't let her realize he'd been questioning her sanity. Brandon held out his hand to her and escorted her inside. The butler opened the door and bowed.

"Welcome home, Your Graces," he said formally.

Brandon had sent word home that he'd married Serenity and ordered the duchess's chambers prepared for her. The entire staff waited inside to greet them. Each one had a huge smile on their face. The men bowed and the women curtsied as they walked past. At the end of the long line, Sebastian waited by the staircase. He sat on the end step with his elbows resting on his knees. When they reached him, he glanced up and stared at Serenity.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"What, poppet?" Serenity replied, concern hitching through her voice.

"Are you my mother now?" His bottom lip wobbled a little bit as if he was fighting tears. He lost the battle and a small droplet fell down his cheek.

Serenity knelt down to his level and wiped the tear away. "Do you want me to be?"

He nodded. "More than anything in the world."

"Sometimes wishes come true," Serenity said. "If you close your

eyes and think hard and long enough it happens. The trick is to never give up.” She pulled Sebastian into her arms and held him against her. “My wish has always been to have a family, and now I have one.” She stroked the top of his head. “I promise I’ll do my best to be a good mother to you.”

“I love you,” Sebastian said. “Don’t ever leave.”

Brandon’s heart clenched at the sight. He hadn’t fully realized how much his son had needed a mother until that moment. Sure, he’d wanted to marry so he’d have one, but it hadn’t been a priority. Serenity would be good for both of them. Brandon loved her more than anything, and apparently so did his son.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly. “This is my home now. You can count on it, but we’ll have to find you a new governess. I don’t think it’s proper for me to continue in that role.”

“I’m already ahead of you in that regard,” Brandon said. “Mrs. Simms should have a list of potential governesses for me to look over. When the time is right you can help me choose one.”

Serenity smiled. “Only the best for you,” she said to Sebastian, then glanced up at Brandon. “I’m going to be quite picky.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Brandon said in agreement.

She tickled Sebastian and he laughed. “Does that meet with your approval?” she asked the boy.

He nodded happily. “Yes, mama.” Brandon’s heart warmed hearing his son refer to Serenity as his mother. He’d made the right choice for both him and his son by marrying her.

Serenity kissed the top of Sebastian’s head. “Now do me a favor and go with Mrs. Simms. Your father and I had a long day and need some time to rest. I’ll come see you later.”

“Promise?” Sebastian asked.

“Of course,” she said with a laugh. “Go play.”

Sebastian ran to the housekeeper and held his hand out to her. His son skipped beside Mrs. Simms as they headed down the hall to the back of the estate. Brandon helped Serenity to her feet and pulled her into his arms. He lifted a brow. “Rest?”

She smiled wickedly. “You promised me pleasure, Your Grace. I’m holding you to it.”

Brandon laughed and followed her up to their room. He always kept his promises, and he wouldn’t balk at this particular one. Could life possibly get any better? Happiness had eluded him for too long. He planned on enjoying every moment of his life and wouldn’t take anything for granted again. Loving Serenity was what he’d been born for, and he’d make sure he loved her well...

Excerpt: Secluded with My Hellion

***READ ON for an excerpt from Linked Across Time Book Ten:
Secluded with My Hellion***

Prologue

Snowflakes fluttered to the ground swirling together to make a white wall in the wind. Lady Odessa Lynwood stared out the window, watching as the lawn around Kingsbridge Castle was blanketed underneath of them. She wanted to go out and play, but her mother had forbid her from doing so. Killian and his friend, Gavin were still out there somewhere. Worry furrowed inside of her. It wasn't fair that she couldn't enjoy the snowfall but her brother could. Why did things have to be different for boys?

"Mama," Odessa called across the room. "Why can't I go outside?" None of the answers the countess had given her made any sense. If it was safe for the boys, it should be for her too. "I want to run in the snow."

"Don't be ridiculous," her mother chastised. "Girls do not frolic in the snow."

Odessa rolled her eyes at her pronouncement. That made things rather clear when her previous answers had not. It wasn't about her safety at all. Her society-driven mother was concerned about propriety. Well, Odessa was almost ten and six. That, in her opinion, was old enough to take a walk in the cold snowy climate. Killian and Gavin were four years older than her. She didn't see any reason not to take advantage of it. The hard part was distracting her mother long enough to escape.

"May I be excused?" Odessa asked.

"No," her mother replied. "If I let you out of my sight, you'll sneak out and try to find your brother."

Odessa narrowed her eyes and glared at her mother. She was the most unreasonable person in all of England. That, and she must be able to read Odessa's mind. Of course she was going to go outside at the first opportunity. Finding Killian was also at the top of her list, but mostly she wanted to see Gavin. He didn't know it yet, but one day she planned on marrying him.

"I'd never disobey you," she said and crossed her fingers behind her back. "I intend to retrieve a book from the library. It will help me

keep my mind off of the snowfall.”

Books—ugh. Not one of them in the library’s collection was worth reading more than once. She should know as she’d already been through most of them. Was it too much to ask for a book with adventure, excitement, and a happy ending? She’d do almost anything to find a tome that displayed all three of those elements. Unfortunately, her mother didn’t see the need to expand their current selection. Killian was the earl now. Perhaps she could sweet talk him into buying her some new reading material.

Her mother sighed. “Very well,” she agreed. “But don’t tarry long. If you force me to come looking for you, I promise you’ll regret it.”

No doubt she would, but it would be worth it. She nearly skipped out of the room, heading toward her bedchamber. Reading could wait until later when she was locked in her room without her dinner. She was well versed in her mother’s forms of punishment. Which was why she kept a book in her room at all times. Her stubborn streak ran wild, and she often found herself in the midst of some sort of reprimand. It paid to always be prepared...

She slid into her room and opened her armoire, then snatched her winter cloak. It was in pristine condition because her mother rarely allowed her outside in inclement weather, but Odessa loved the wrap’s dark blue velvet softness. It was dark green velvet with white fur trimmed around the hood and in the front. She slid it over her arm and grabbed a warm pair of gloves. Once she was outside, she’d slip both on. If she traipsed through the house wearing them, it would give her away much faster.

Odessa opened her door and peered out into the hallway. She took a deep breath and headed for the servant’s stairs. If she was lucky, no one would see her, but getting by a servant was easier than encountering her mother. The stairs creaked as she slowly made her way down them. So far so good... At the bottom of the steps, she went to the back of the house and slipped out the garden entrance. No one came to this side of the house in winter, and she was not free and clear to enjoy the snow.

She shivered and realized she still had to put on her winter garments. After donning them, she ran across the back lawn, grinning each step of the way. The cold wind burned her skin, but she loved every moment of it. What should she do now that she’d disobeyed her mother and went outside? What would Killian and Gavin do?

They’d go to the river...

The River Tweed ran near their home, and in the summer, Killian and Gavin often went swimming in it. Something else Odessa wasn’t allowed to do. Sometimes it was awful being female. Now though, it was her chance to defy everything and do what she wanted for a

change. When else would she have the opportunity to feel this much exhilaration? Never. One day she'd marry and have children of her own. This was her chance to be free of rules and obligations.

With the cold wind blowing would they still go down to the river? Her mother rarely allowed her outside during the winter months so she wasn't sure. She nibbled on her lips a little bit and contemplated what her next move should be. The river was the only place she knew for sure they went to. It was a good a place to start as any... Decision made, she headed toward the river. Once there she wasn't sure what she'd do, but that didn't matter. Going there and being bold was.

At the top of the hill, near the river's edge, she threw her arms out and leaned her head back, allowing her hood to fall. Snow trickled over her skin and saturated her hair and clothes. Odessa stuck her tongue out and tasted the cold snowflakes. They hit her mouth and melted immediately on contact. Her giggles echoed through the valley. Never would she feel this much freedom again. When she went inside, her mother wouldn't let her forget it either.

"What are you doing out here?" a male asked.

Startled, Odessa lost her balance. She flailed her arms out, trying to regain her equilibrium, but to no avail. The ground slipped out from underneath her and she tumbled toward the river. As she rolled down the hill toward the icy landscape, she caught a glimpse of Gavin towering above her. His face had lost all color, making his dark hair stick out in the white world around him. She wasn't sure how long he stood their staring at her either and couldn't find a reason to ponder on it. There were far greater things for her to be concerned with. If she didn't stop herself, she'd plunge right into the river. The ice might do one of two things: break her fall or crack on impact. She wasn't sure which one she wanted to happen...



Gavin cursed and started down the hill after Odessa. He shouldn't have startled her. If something happened to her, he'd never forgive himself. Killian would probably strangle him as soon as he found out, and he wouldn't blame him. Killian was his best friend, and Odessa his adored little sister. Sure, she could be a pest at times, but Killian loved her. Gavin loved her...

He would make sure she was all right no matter what. She was too important to him and to her family. Why she was out in the storm, he

didn't know. He and Killian had gone out to help a nearby farmer gather some livestock that had escaped. He was about to head back to the castle when movement near the river drew his attention. At first he'd thought perhaps another sheep had escaped and went to retrieve it. As he moved closer he realized his mistake. There wasn't any animals in the distance—they would have been far easier to wrangle. A female figure loomed on the horizon and as she lowered her hood he swore under his breath. What the hell was Odessa doing out in the storm? The lass was crazy and brave to come outside alone in a blizzard. She might have been all right too if not for his recklessness.

Odessa hit the ice covering the river, hard. Her head bounced across the surface several times. His heart froze inside of his chest and he then he rushed over to her side. "Don't move," he yelled. "I'm coming to help you."

Odessa brought her hand up and pressed it to the back of her head. Her pain filled moans made him curse. He had to move faster before something more dire befell her. So far, she didn't appear to be gravely injured. Gavin stopped at the edge of the river bank and reached over to her. "Give me your hand and I'll pull you over. I don't want to put my weight on the ice because it might break."

"I'm afraid," she said. "I don't think I can do this."

"Yes, you can," he encouraged. "You're the bravest girl I know. There's nothing you can't do if you set your mind to it."

"If I die..."

"Shut your mouth," he ordered. "No one is dying today. Now give me your hand."

Odessa reached out to him, but she was too far away for him to grasp her outstretched hand. He swore under his breath and prayed she hadn't heard the litany of words he'd uttered. She was too young to be exposed to any kind of profanity. "I need you to move a little closer."

"I can't." Her voice wobbled as she spoke. How close was she to tears?

"Don't be silly," he said as lightly as he could muster. Gavin couldn't let on that his own fear was a tight knot inside of his belly. She needed him to be strong, and by God, he would be. "I already told you that you can do anything. Don't let anyone ever tell you different."

"All right," she said. A hint of uncertainty was laced through the words, but she was agreeing to do as he asked. "Don't let me down."

"I would never," he reassured her. "Now slide toward me like the good girl you are."

Slowly she inched over to him. His heart raced inside of his chest and nothing would calm it down. Not until she was safe... The time it

took for her to move closer seemed to pass by in slow motion. The wind picked up speed and whipped against his face. The cold had seeped into his bones long ago, but now he was numb to it. He reached as far as he could, and finally her small hand hit the center of his palm. He grasped tightly and yanked her toward him as the ice began to crack. Her feet hit the water when a huge chunk fell into the river, but the rest of her landed on him as they both tumbled back against the bank.

"See," he said, trying to catch his breath. "I'm a man of my word."

"That you are," she agreed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I owe you my life."

"No you don't," he replied harshly. "It's my fault you fell in the first place."

"Let's not debate fault. If I'd not been a stupid girl and disobeyed my mother, I'd never have been here in the first place."

"That's true enough," he agreed. "Let's get you inside. Your foot will be frozen in no time from the river. I don't want you to catch ill from your little adventure."

He wanted to make sure she stayed safe always. He cared for her deeply and would do anything for her. Killian was his best friend, but Odessa owned his heart. He tried to think of her as a sister, but he couldn't. At one time that had been easier to do. When she was a small girl she'd been a cute cherub and he'd thought of her fondly. As she grew though he started to see her differently and he couldn't stop his feelings from evolving. Odessa drove him mad at times, but he'd forever love her. Even with her recklessly putting herself in danger he couldn't fully chastise her for it.

She shook her head defiantly. Her dark curls bounced around her head. "Not yet. I haven't properly thanked you," she said and pressed her lips to his. He was too shocked to push her away and had no idea how to stop it. The kiss was over before it started. "Thank you, Lord Havenwood. You'll always be my hero." He hated the damn title, and he wished he didn't have the responsibilities of the earldom.

Gavin was no hero...

Lady Odessa was a pretty girl, and when she was fully grown she'd be devastating to behold. She'd stolen his heart the moment he met her, but he'd never tell her that. His family was cursed. Gavin never intended to marry and let another carry that burden with him. One day he'd explain that to her, but for now, he'd settle for getting her home where she could be warm and safe. She was too young, and he had too many problems to lie at her feet.

He didn't give her a choice after that little demonstration. Gavin lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the castle. Once there, her mother could dote on her and make sure she was taken care of.

Gavin would have to be content with knowing she was loved by others, because Odessa could never be his.

About the Author

Dawn Brower holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Master of Arts in Education, and a Master of Arts in Liberal Arts with concentrations in Literature, History, and Sociology. She works as a substitute teacher and enjoys the flexibility it gives her to concentrate on her other endeavors.

Growing up she was the only girl out of six children. She is a single mother of two teenage boys; there is never a dull moment in her life. Reading books is her favorite hobby. While she loves all genres she focuses most of her writing on historical and contemporary romance.

There are always stories inside her head; she just never thought she could make them come to life. That creativity has finally found an outlet.

For more information visit her website at: <http://www.authordawnbrower.com/>

Books by Dawn Brower

Broken Pearl

Deadly Benevolence

There You'll Be

Don't Happen Twice

A Wallflower's Christmas Kiss

Forever My Earl

Marsden Romances

A Flawed Jewel

A Crystal Angel

A Treasured Lily

A Sanguine Gem

A Hidden Ruby

A Discarded Pearl

Novak Springs

Cowgirl Fever

Dirty Proof

Unbridled Pursuit

Sensual Games

Christmas Temptation

Linked Across Time

Saved by My Blackguard

Searching for My Rogue

Seduction of My Rake

Surrendering to My Spy

Spellbound by My Charmer

Stolen by My Knave

Separated from My Love

Scandalized by My Prince

Heart's Intent

One Heart to Give

Unveiled Hearts

Heart of the Moment

Broken Curses

The Enchanted Princess